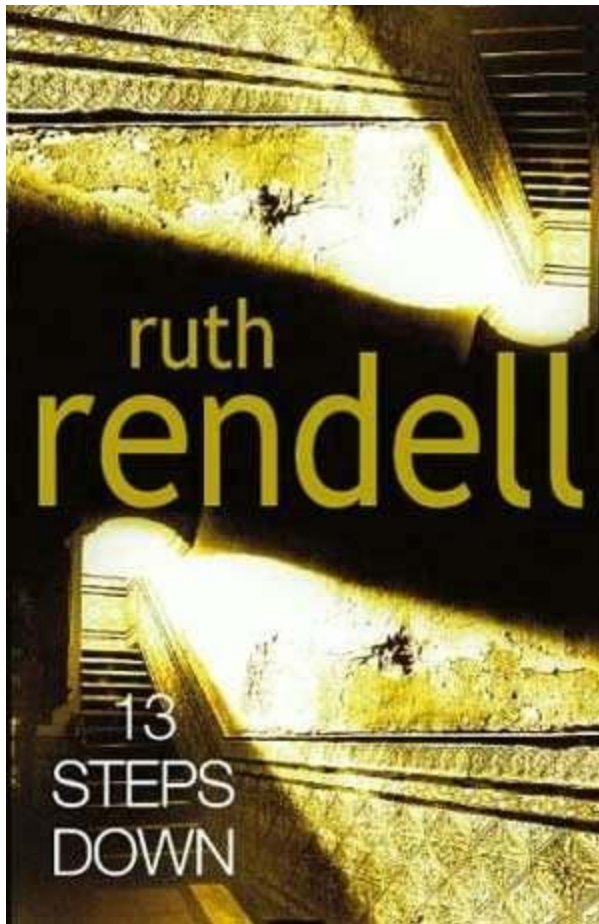


ruth
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13
STEPS
DOWN



**THIRTEEN
STEPS
DOWN**

By Ruth Rendell

First published in 2004

A classic Rendellian loner, Mix Cellini is superstitious about the number

13. Living in a decaying house in Notting Hill, Mix is obsessed with 10

Rillington Place, where the notorious John Christie committed a series of

foul murders. He is also infatuated with a beautiful model who lives

nearby - a woman who would not look at him twice. Mix's landlady,

Gwedolen Chawcer is equally reclusive - living her life through her library of books. Both landlady and lodger inhabit weird worlds of their own. But when reality intrudes into Mix's life, a long pent-up violence explodes.

Chapter 1

Mix was standing where the street should have been. Or where he

thought it should have been. By this time shock and disbelief were past.

Bitter disappointment, then rage, filled his body and climbed into his

throat, half choking him. How dared they? How could they, whoever they

were, destroy what should have been a national monument? The house

itself should have been a museum, one of those blue plaques high up on

its wall, the garden, lovingly preserved just as it was, part of a tour

visiting parties could have made. If they had wanted a curator they need

have looked no further than him.

Everything was new, carefully and soullessly designed. "Soulless"-that

was the word and he was proud of himself for thinking it up. The place

was pretty, he thought in disgust, typical yuppie-land building. The

petunias in the flowerbeds particularly enraged him. Of course he knew

that some time back before he was born they had changed the name from

Rillington Place to Ruston Close but now there wasn't even a Ruston

Close anymore. He had brought an old map with him but it was useless,

harder to find the old streets than searching for the child's features in

the fifty-year-old face. Fifty years was right. It would be half a century

since Reggie was caught and hanged. If they had to rename the streets,

surely they could have put up a sign somewhere that said, Formerly

Rillington Place. Or something to tell visitors they were in Reggie country.

Hundreds must come here, some of them expectant and deeply

disappointed, others knowing nothing of the place's history, all of them

encountering this smart little enclave of red brick and raised flowerbeds,

geraniums and busy lizzies spilling out of window boxes, and trees

chosen for their golden and creamy white foliage.

It was midsummer and a fine day, the sky a cloudless blue. The little

grass plots were a bright and lush green, a pink climbing plant draping a

rosy cloak over walls cunningly constructed on varying levels. Mix turned

away, the choking anger making his heart beat faster and more loudly,

thud, thud, thud. If he had known everything had been eradicated, he

would never have considered the flat in St. Blaise House. He had come to

this corner of Notting Hill solely because it had been Reggie's district. Of

course he had known the house itself was gone and its neighbors too but

still he had been confident the place would be easily recognizable, a

street shunned by the faint-hearted, frequented by intelligent

enthusiasts like himself. But the feeble, the squeamish, the politically

correct had had their way and torn it all down. They would have been

laughing at the likes of him, he thought, and triumphant at replacing

history with a tasteless housing estate.

The visit itself he had been saving up as a treat for when he was settled

in. A treat! How often, when he was a child, had a promised treat turned

into a let down? Too often, he seemed to remember, and it didn't stop

when one was grown-up and a responsible person. Still, he wasn't

moving again, not after paying Ed and his mate to paint the place and

refit the kitchen. He turned his back on the pretty little new houses, the

trees and flowerbeds, and walked slowly up Oxford Gardens and across

Ladbroke Grove to view the house where Reggie's first victim had had a

room. At least that wasn't changed. By the look of it, no one had painted

it since the woman's death in 1943. No one seemed to know which room

it had been, there were no details in any of the books he'd read. He gazed

a the windows, speculating and making guesses, until someone looked

out at him and he thought he'd better move on.

St. Blaise Avenue was quite up-market where it crossed Oxford

Gardens, tree-lined with ornamental cherries, but the farther he walked

downhill, it too went down until it was all sixties local authority housing,

dry cleaners and motorcycle spare parts places and corner shops. All

except for the terrace on the otherside, isolated elegant Victorian, and the

big house, the only one like it in the whole neighborhood that wasn't

divided into a dozen flats, St. Blaise House. Pity they hadn't pulled that

lot down, Mix thought, and left Rillington Place alone.

No cherries here but great dusty plane trees with huge leaves and bark

peeling off their trunks. They were partly responsible for making the

place so dark. He paused to look at the house, marveling at its size, as

he always did, and wondering why on earth the old woman hadn't sold it

to a developer years ago. Three floors high, it was of once--white, now

gray stucco, with steps up to a great front door that was half hidden in

the depths of a pillared portico. Above, almost under the eaves, was a

circular window quite different from the other oblong windows, being of

stained glass, clouded by the accumulation of grime built up over the

years since it had last been cleaned.

Mix let himself in. The hallway alone, he had thought when he first saw

the place, was big enough for a normal-size flat to fit inside, big, square,

and dark like everything in there. Big dark chairs with carved backs

stood uselessly against the walls, one of them under a huge mirror in a

carved wooden frame, its glass all spotted with greenish blots like islands

on a map of the sea. Stairs went down to a basement but he had never

been in it and as far as he knew no one else had for years and years.

When he came in he always hoped she wouldn't be anywhere about and

usually she wasn't, but today he was out of luck. Dressed in her usual

garments, long droopy cardigan and skirt with a dipping hemline, she

was standing beside a huge carved table that must have weighed a ton,

holding up a colored flyer advertising a Tibetan restaurant. When she

saw him she said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Cellini," in her upper-class

drawl, putting, he thought, a lot of scorn into her voice.

When he spoke to Gwendolen Chawcer, when addressing her was

unavoidable, he did his best to shock her--so far without marked

success.

"You'll never guess where I've been."

"That is almost a certainty," she said. "So it seems pointless to attempt

it."

Sarcastic old bitch. "Rillington Place," he said, "or where it used to be. I

wanted to see where Christie buried all those women he killed in his

garden but there's not a trace of it left."

She put the flyer back on the table. No doubt, it would lie there for

months. Then she surprised him. "I went to his house once," she said,

"when I was young."

"You did? Why was that?"

He knew she wouldn't be forthcoming and she wasn't. "I had a reason

to go there. The visit lasted no more than half an hour.

He was an

unpleasant man."

He couldn't control his excitement. "What sort of an impression did he

make on you? Did you feel you were in the presence of a murderer? Was

his wife there?"

She laughed her cold laugh. "Goodness, Mr. Cellini, I've no time to

answer all these questions. I have to get on."

With what? She seldom did anything but read, as far as he knew. She

must have read thousands of books, she was always at it.

He felt

frustrated after her unsatisfactory but provocative response. She might

be a mine of information about Reggie but she was too standoffish to talk

about it.

He began to mount the stairs, hating them with a fierce hatred, though

they were not narrow or precarious or winding. There were fifty-two and

one of the things he disliked about them was that they were composed of

three flights, twenty-two in this stretch, seventeen in the next, but

thirteen in the topflight. If there was anything that upset Mix more than

unpleasant surprises and rude old women, it was the number thirteen.

St. Blaise House, fortunately, was number 54 St. Blaise Avenue.

One day when old Chawcer was out he had counted the bedrooms, not

including his own, and found there were nine. Some were furnished, if

you could call it furniture, some were not. The whole place was filthy. In

his opinion, no one had done any housework in it for years, though he

had seen her flicking about with a feather duster. All that woodwork,

carved with shields and swords and helmets, faces and flowers, leaves

and garlands and ribbons, lay under an ancient accumulation of dust.

Banister was linked to banister and cornice to picture rail by ropes of

cobwebs. She had lived here all her long life, first with her parents, then

with her dad, then alone. Apart from that he knew nothing about her. He

didn't even know how she happened to have three bedrooms on the top

floor already converted into a flat.

The stairs grew narrower after the first landing and the last flight, the

top one, was tiled, not carpeted. Mix had never seen a staircase of shiny

black tiles before but there were many things in Miss Chawcer's house

he had never seen before. No matter what kind of shoes he wore, those

tiles made a terrible noise, a thump-thumping or a clack-clacking, and

his belief was that she had tiled the stairs so that she would be able to

tell what time her tenant came in. He had already got into the habit of

removing his shoes and continuing in his socks alone. It wasn't that he

ever did anything wrong but he didn't want her knowing his business.

The stained glass window speckled the top landing with spots of colored

light. It was a picture of a girl looking into a pot with some sort of plant in

it. When old Chawcer brought him up here for the first time she had

called it the Isabella window and the picture, Isabella and the Pot of

Basil, made very little sense to Mix. As far as he was concerned, basil

was something growing in a bag you bought at Tesco. The girl looked ill,

her face was the only bit of the glass that was white, and Mix resented

having to see her each time he went into or came out of his flat.

He called his home an apartment but Gwendolen Chawcer called it

"rooms." She lived in the past, in his opinion, and not thirty or forty

years ago like most old people but a hundred years. He had put in the

bathroom himself with Ed and his mate's help and fitted the kitchen. He

paid for it, so Miss Chawcer couldn't really complain. She ought to have

been pleased; it would still be there for the next tenant when he was

famous and had moved out. The fact was that she had never been able to

see the need for a bathroom. When she was young, she told him, you had

a chamber pot in your bedroom and a basin on the washstand and the

maid brought you up a jug of hot water.

Mix had a bedroom as well and a large living room, dominated by a

huge poster photograph of Nerissa Nash, taken when a newspaper

started naming the models as well as the clothes designers. That was in

the days when they called her the poor man's Naomi Campbell. They did

so no longer. Mix stood in front of the poster, as he often did when he

first came in, like a religious contemplating a holy picture, his lips

murmuring, "I love you, I adore you," instead of prayers.

He was earning good money at Fiterama and he had spent freely on this

flat. The chrome-encased television and video and DVD player were on

the hire purchase as was most of the kitchen equipment but that, to use

one of Ed's favorite expressions, was par for the course, everyone did it.

He had paid for the white carpet and gray tweed suite with ready cash,

buying the black marble statue of the nude girl on an impulse but not for

a moment regretting his purchase. The poster of Nerissa he had had

framed in the same chrome finish as the TV: In the black ash shelving he

kept his collection of Reggie books: 10 Rillington Place, John Reginald

Halliday Christie, The Christie Legend, Murder in Rillington Place, and

Christie's Victims among many others. Richard Attenborough's film of 10

Rillington Place he had on video and DVD. It was outrageous, he

thought, that one Hollywood movie after another was remade while you

never heard a thing about a remake of that. The one he possessed he

often played and the digital version was even better, clearer and brighter.

Richard Attenborough was wonderful, he wasn't arguing about that, but

he didn't look much like Reggie. A taller actor was needed with sharper

features and burning eyes.

Mix was inclined to daydream and sometimes he speculated as to

whether he would be famous through knowing Nerissa or through his

expert knowledge of Reggie. There was probably no one alive today, not

even Ludovic Kennedy who had written the book, who knew more. It

might be his mission in life to reawaken interest in Rillington Place and

its most famous occupant, though how this was to come about after

what he had seen that afternoon was as yet a mystery. He would solve it,

of course. Perhaps he would write a book about Reggie himself, and not

one full of feeble comments on the man's wickedness and depravity. His

book would draw attention to the murderer as artist.

It was getting on for six. Mix poured himself his favorite drink. He had

invented it himself and called it Boot Camp because it had such a savage

kick. It mystified him that no one he had offered it to seemed to share his

taste for a double measure of vodka, a glass of Sauvignon, and a

tablespoonful of Cointreau poured over crushed ice. His fridge was the

kind that spewed out the crushed ice all prepared. He was just savoring

the first sip when his mobile rang.

It was Colette Gilbert-Bamber to tell him she was desperate to get her

treadmill repaired. It might be no more than the electric plug or it might

be something bigger. Her husband had gone out but she had had to stay

at home because she was expecting an important phone call. Mix knew

what all that meant. Being in love with his distant star, his queen and

lady, didn't mean he was never to treat himself to a bit of fun. Once he

and Nerissa were together, a recognized item, it would be a different thing.

Regretfully but getting his priorities right, Mix put his Boot Camp into

the fridge. He cleaned his teeth, gargled with a mouthwash that tasted

not unlike his cocktail without the stimulus, and made his way down the

stairs. In the midst of the house you wouldn't have guessed how fine the

day was and bright and hot the sunshine. Here it was always cold and

strangely silent too, it always was. You couldn't hear the Hammersmith

and City Line running above ground from Latimer Road to Shepherd's

Bush, or the traffic in Ladbroke Grove. The only noise came from the

Westway, but if you didn't know you wouldn't have imagined you were

listening to traffic. It sounded like the sea, like waves breaking on the

shore, or what you hear when you hold a big seashell up to your ear, a

soft unceasing roar.

These days Gwendolen sometimes needed the help of a magnifying glass

to read small print. And, unfortunately, most of the books she wanted to

read were printed in what she understood to be called 10-point, Her

ordinary glasses couldn't cope with Papa's edition of The Decline and Fall

of the Roman Empire, for instance, or what she was reading now, a very

old copy of Middlemarch, published in the nineteenth century.

Like her bedroom above it, the drawing room encompassed the whole

depth of the house, a pair of large sash windows overlooking the street,

French windows at the back giving on the garden. When she was reading,

Gwendolen reclined on a sofa upholstered in dark brown corduroy, its

back surmounted with a carved mahogany dragon. The dragon's tail

curved round to meet one of the sofa arms, while its head reared up as it

snarled at the black marble fireplace. Most of the furniture was rather

like that, carved and thickly padded and covered in velvet that was

brown or dull green or the dark red of claret, but some was made of dark

veined marble with gilt legs. There was a very large mirror on one wall,

framed in gilt leaves and fruit and curlicues, which had grown dull with

time and lack of care.

Beyond the French windows, open now to the warm evening light, lay

the garden. Gwendolen still saw it as it used to be, the lawn closely

mown to the smoothness of emerald velvet, the herbaceous border a light

with flowers, the trees pruned to make the best of their luxuriant foliage.

Or, rather, she saw that it could be like that with a little attention,

nothing that couldn't be achieved by a day's work. That the grass was

knee high, the flowerbeds a mass of weeds, and the trees ruined by dead

branches, escaped her notice. The printed word was more real to her

than a comfortable interior and pleasing exterior.

Her mind and her memories too were occasionally stronger than the

book; then she laid it down to stare at the brownish cobweb-hung ceiling

and the dusty prisms on the chandelier, to think and to remember.

The man Cellini she disliked, but that was of small importance. His

inelegant conversation had awakened sleeping things, Christie and his

murders, Rillington Place, her fear, Dr. Reeves, and Bertha. It must be at

least fifty-two years ago, maybe fifty-three. Rillington Place had been a

sordid slum, the terraces of houses with front doors opening onto the

street, an iron foundry with a tall chimney at the far end of it. Until she

went there she had no idea such places existed. She had led a sheltered

life, both before that day and after it. Bertha would have married--those

sort of people always did. Probably had a string of children who by now

would be middle-aged, the first one of them the cause of her misfortunes.

Why did women behave like that? She had never understood. She had never been tempted. Not even with Dr. Reeves. Her feelings for him had always been chaste and honorable, as had his for her. She was sure of that, in spite of his subsequent behavior. Perhaps, after all, she had chosen the better part.

What on earth made Cellini so interested in Christie? It wasn't a

healthy attitude of mind. Gwendolen picked up her book again. Not in

this one but in another of George Eliot's, Adam Bede, there was a girl

who had behaved like Bertha and met a dreadful fate. She read for

another half hour, lost to the world, oblivious to everything but the page

in front of her. A footfall above her head alerted her.

Poor as her sight was becoming, Gwendolen's hearing was superb. Not

for a woman of her age but for anyone of any age. Her friend Olive

Fordyce said she was sure Gwendolen could hear a bat squeak. She

listened now. He was coming down the stairs. No doubt he thought she

didn't know he took his shoes off in an attempt to come and go secretly.

She was not so easily deceived. The lowest flight creaked. Nothing he

could do would put a stop to that, she thought triumphantly. She heard

him padding across the hall but when he closed the front door it was

with a slam that shook the house and caused a whitish flake to drop off the ceiling onto her left foot.

She went to one of the front windows and saw him getting into his car.

It was a small blue car and, in her opinion, he kept it absurdly clean.

When he had gone she went out to the kitchen, opened the door on an

ancient and never-used spindryer to take out a netting bag which had

once held potatoes. The bag was full of keys. No labels were attached to

them but she knew very well the shape and color of the one she wanted.

The key in the pocket of her cardigan, she began to mount the stairs.

It was a long way up but she was used to it. She might be over eighty

but she was thin and strong. Never in her life had she had a day's

illness. Of course she couldn't climb those stairs as fast as she could fifty

years ago but that was only to be expected. Otto was sitting halfway up

the top flight, dismembering and eating some small mammal. She took

no notice of him nor he of her. The evening sun blazed through the

Isabella window and since there was no wind to blow on the glass, an

nearly perfect colored picture of the girl and the pot of basil appeared

reflected on the floor, a circular mosaic of reds and blues and purples

and greens. Gwendolen stopped to admire it. Rarely indeed was this

facsimile so clear and still.

She lingered for only a minute or two before inserting her key in the

lock and letting herself into Cellini's flat.

All this white paint was unwise, she thought. It showed every mark.

And gray was a bad furnishing color, cold and stark. She walked into his

bedroom, wondering why he bothered to make his bed when he would

only have to unmake it at night. Everything was depressingly tidy. Very

likely he suffered from that affliction she had read about in a newspaper,

obsessivecompulsive disorder. The kitchen was just as bad. It looked like

one of those on show at the Ideal Home Exhibition, to which Olive had

insisted on taking her sometime in the eighties. A place for everything

and everything in its place, not a packet or tin left on the counter,

nothing in the sink. How could anyone live like that?

She opened the door of the fridge. There was very little food to be seen

but in the door rack were two bottles of wine and, in the very front of the

middle shelf, a nearly full glass of something that looked like faintly

colored water. Gwendolen sniffed it. Not water, certainly not. So he

drank, did he? Shecouldn't say she was surprised. Making her way back

into the living room, she stopped at the bookshelves. Any books, no matter

of what kind, always drew her attention. These were not the sort she

would read, perhaps that anyone should read. All of them, except for one

called Sex for Men in the 21st Century, were about Christie. She had

scarcely thought about the man for more than forty years and today she

seemed not to be able to get away from him.

As for Cellini, this would be another of his obsessions. The more I know

people, said Gwendolen, quoting her father, the more I like books. She

went downstairs and into the kitchen. There she fetched herself a cheese

and pickle sandwich, ready made from the corner shop, and taking it

and a glass of orange juice back to the dragon sofa, she returned to

Middlemarch.

Chapter 2

It was a funny part of the world altogether. Mix hadn't got used to it yet,

the Westway to the north and Wormwood Scrubs and its prison not far

away, a tangle of little winding streets, big houses, purpose-built blocks,

ugly Victorian terraces, Gothic places more like churches than homes,

cottages cunningly designed on different levels to look as if they had been

there for two hundred years, corner shops, MOT testing centers,

garages, meeting halls, real churches for Holy Catholic Apostolics or

Latter Day Saints and convents for Oblates and Carmelites. The whole

place populated by people whose families had always been there and

people whose families came from Freetown and Goa and Vilnius and

Beirut and Aleppo.

The Gilbert-Bambers also lived in West Eleven but the upmarket

fashionable part. Their house was in Lansdowne Walk, not as big as Miss

Chawcer's but more imposing, with Corinthian columns all along the

front and urns with bushes in them on the balconies. It took Mix no

more than five minutes to drive there and another five to park his car on

a meter, costing him nothing after six-thirty. Colette gave him one of her

sexy looks as she opened the door, a look that wasn't in the least

necessary as both knew why she had sent for him and what he had come

for. For his part, he put up a show of formality, smiling as he marched in

with his case of tools and saying it was upstairs if he remembered

rightly.

"Of course you remember rightly," Colette said, giggling.

More stairs, but these were wide and shallow and anyway there was only

one flight to go up. "How's Miss Nash these days?"

He'd known she wouldn't like that and she didn't. "I'm sure she's fine. I

haven't seen her for a couple of weeks."

It was at the Gilbert-Bambers' that he had first met Nerissa Nash.

"Encountered" might be the better word. Until he saw her he had thought

Colette beautiful, her slenderness and her long blond hair and her full

lips, even though she'd told him about the collagen implants. The

difference between them, he had thought, was that between the

Hollywood star and the prettiest girl in the office.

Colette preceded him into the bedroom. "What she called her gym was

really a dressing room that opened out of it next to the bathroom, and

had been originally designed for the master of the house.

"He'd knock on her door when he wanted a bonk," Colette had

explained. "They were all bonkers in those days. Isn't that funny it's the

same word?"

The room was now furnished with a treadmill, a step machine, a

stationary bicycle, and an elliptical cross-trainer. There was a rack of

weights, a rolled-up yoga mat, a turquoise colored inflatable ball, and a

fridge that had never seen the like of Boot Camp but held only sparkling

spring water. Mix could see at once why the treadmill wouldn't start.

Colette was no fool and was probably well aware of the reason herself.

The machine had a safety device in the form of a key that slotted into a

keyhole and a string attached to it with a clip on the other end. You were

supposed to fasten it to your clothes while you used it so that if you fell

over the key would be pulled out and the motor stop running. Mix held

up the key.

"You didn't put it in."

"As the actress said to the bishop."

He thought this rejoinder extremely old hat. He'd heard his stepfather

say it a good twenty years ago. "It won't start unless the key's in," he said

in a toneless voice, intended to show her he didn't think her witty. Still,

he should complain. He'd get his fifty-pound call-out fee for just coming

here.

He inserted the key, started the machine, ran it up, and to delay things

a little--why should she have it all her own way?--applied some oil

underneath the pedals. Colette switched it off herself and led him back

into the bedroom. He sometimes wondered what would happen if the

Honourable Hugo Gilbert-Bamber came back unexpectedly, but he could

always nip back into his clothes and crouch down among the machines

with screwdriver and oil can.

Mix intended to be famous. The only possible life anyone could wish for

these days, it seemed to him, was a celebrity's. To be stopped in the

street and asked for your autograph, to be forced to travel incognito, to

see your picture in the papers, to be in demand by journalists for

interviews, to have fans speculate about your sex life, to be quoted in

gossip columns. To wear shades when you didn't want to be recognized,

to be transported in a limo with tinted windows. To have your own PR

person and maybe get Max Clifford to represent you.

It would be best to be famous for something you did that people liked or

because they admired you, like he did Nerissa Nash, But fame deriving

from some great crime was enviable in a way. "What would it feel like to

be the man the police muffle out of a courthouse with a coat over his

head because if they saw him the crowd would tear him to pieces?

Assassination secured your fame forever. Only think of the killer of John

Lennon, or of President Kennedy, or Princip, who shot the Austrian

Archduke and started the First World War. But being Nerissa Nash's

escort would be better and a lot safer. Soon it would lead to celebrity

status, he would be invited on TV chat shows, asked to parties by the

Beckhams and Madonna.

Colette had been a model herself, though in a minor league, and

marriage to a stockbroker ended her career. But she and Nerissa

remained firm friends. Mix had been in the gym/dressing room, fitting a

new running belt to the treadmill, on this occasion a legitimate task.

There couldn't be any of the other because a hired cook was in the house

getting lunch for Nerissa and Colette. The two women came into the

bedroom for Colette to show her friend some new creation she had

bought for an astronomical sum in a Notting Hill boutique. Whispering

and giggling reached Mix's ears. He couldn't be sure but he thought he

heard Nerissa warn Colette to be careful about undressing because "the

man" was next door in the gym.

Mix was familiar enough with Colette's ways and tastes to know she

wouldn't care if fifty men were in the gym, all gaping at her through the

glass door, she'd like it, but he admired Nerissa's modest attitude. You

didn't come across much of that these days. Up until then he had never

seen her beyond glancing at her photograph in the tabloids. Her voice

was so pretty and her laugh so silvery that he was determined to see her.

He used a technique he always employed when needing to speak to the

lady of the house and, clearing his throat rather loudly, called out, "Are

you there, Mrs. Gilbert-Bamber?"

A giggle from Colette answered him, so he wasted no more time and

walked into the bedroom. Colette was in scarlet bra and thong but he

had seen more of her than that. In his own words, he wasn't bothered.

Besides, Colette's friend commanded all his attention. To say she was the

most beautiful woman he had ever seen was an understatement.

Immediately he felt that all women, to be good to look at, should have

long black hair, huge golden eyes, and skin the color of a cappuccino.

Apart from all this and her shape, her height, and her graceful way of

standing, instead of the hauteur he would have expected in her face, he

saw a warm sweetness, and when she smiled and said, "Hi," he was a lost man.

After that he collected in his scrapbooks every picture of her he saw. He

even found her portrait on postcards in a tourist shop in Shepherd's

Bush. When there was a film premiere he waited, sometimes for hours,

on the pavement outside the cinema for a glimpse of her alighting from a

car. Once he was amply rewarded, having secured a position at the front

of the fans. Helped out of the car, she drew her white fur stole round the

diaphanous yellow shift she wore and seeing him—recognizing him?—bestowed on him a radiant smile.

In one of his fantasies he and she sat in a club, alone at their table,

gazing into each other's eyes. A cameraman approached them, then

another. Nerissa smiled at the photographers, then at him. She

whispered, "Kiss me," and he did. It was the most wonderful clinch he

had ever had, made even better by the flashes round them and the

encouragement of the cameramen. Their kiss was in all the papers next

day and the headline she imagined thrilled him. "Nerissa and Her New

Man" and "Nerissa Seals New Love with a Kiss." They'd call him

"Michael Cellini, the distinguished criminologist."

Meanwhile he never saw her in the flesh, that golden flesh so delicately

laid on long bones, though he had several times waited outside her

house on Campden Hill Square, waiting for a glimpse of her at a window.

Colette had told him where she lived, though she had done so

reluctantly, and he had asked her if Nerissa had any exercise equipment

in her home.

"She goes to the gym."

"Which gym?" he asked, gently biting her neck the way she liked.

"The nearest, I suppose. What do you want to know for?"

"Just curious," he said.

He must follow her, he knew that, though it savored of stalking, which

he didn't want to think of in connection with Nerissa. Just once he'd

follow her and when he found the gym he'd join. He wasn't as fit as he

should be in his job, and why not her gym as well as another?

He had been with Fiterama for nine years, the first eight and a bit at

their Birmingham branch. When he came to London and started looking

for a place to live, he rented for a while a room in Tufuell Park. Hilldrop

Crescent, just round the corner, was another location that fascinated

him. They hadn't changed its name, though Dr. Crippen, who killed his

wife and put bits of her under the floor, had lived there. He'd never read

anything about Crippen; his crime was so long ago, before the First

World War and practically ancient history. Then he saw a television

program about catching criminals by wireless and from that he learned

that Crippen was the first to be caught by this means. He learned too

where he had lived. Something which might be distasteful to another

man, or simply of no interest, excited Mix and he went out to take a look.

The disappointment he felt when he found the house gone and newer

buildings on the site was a precursor of his much deeper bitterness at

the destruction of Rillington Place.

It was seeing the film that started him off. He was still living at home

then and he watched it on his mother's old black-and-white television.

Never much for reading, he had found the book of the film, as he thought

of it, on a stall outside a junkshop. It came as a surprise when he looked

at the photographs and saw that John Reginald Halliday Christie looked,

not like Attenborough, but far more like himself. Of course he was a lot

younger and he didn't wear glasses. He forced himself to look in the

mirror long enough to be sure of the resemblance. In a funny way it

seemed to bring him and the mass murderer closer together, and it was

from that trifle that he began referring to him in his mind as Reggie

rather than Christie. After all, what had he done that was so terrible? Rid

the world of a bunch of useless women, hookers and streetwalkers, most

of them.

Reggie. The name sounded nice. Sort of warm and friendly. It was no

surprise to Mix to discover in his reading that people had liked Reggie,

looked up to him and admired him, a lot of them. They had recognized in

him a man of power. That was one of the things Mix liked about him,

that he was a strongman. He would have made a good father, wouldn't

have stood any nonsense from his kids but wouldn't have knocked them

about either. That wasn't Reggie's way. Fleetinglly, as happened every

day, Mix thought of Javy. To his mind, women shouldn't be allowed to

give their children stepfathers.

Driving home from Colette's, his thoughts returned to what old Chawcer

had told him. He was still amazed by it. She had actually been to

Reggie's house. She had met Reggie. To Mix, at his age, Reggie seemed to

have lived in a far distant time, in history really, but he realized that was

not so for old Chawcer. She must be in her eighties and, when Reggie

had lived in Rillington Place, had still been young, had been a girl. Now,

as all the books said and everyone knew who was interested, Reggie had

lured his victims to his house by posing as an abortionist. Therefore, she

must have gone to him with that in view. What else?

Because he was himself young in the twenty-first century, Mix thought

things had always been the way they were now. Old Chawcer's youth, as

far as sexual encounters went, would have been much as his was, love

affairs, one-night stands, and sex as often as one could get it. Old

Chawcer would have been careless, forgotten her pill, as they did, and

found herself up the spout. What little Mix knew about the law was

concentrated on the liability of exercise equipment manufacturers and

retailers for the safety of their products. Of acts making abortion legal he

was ignorant, only supposing that when old Chawcer was young you

couldn't just go to a hospital and get it done. It stood to reason. If that

had been possible Reggie would have been out of business.

The big question was: If she'd been there and in his hands, why was

she still alive after fifty years? Maybe he would never know but he longed

to find out.

In his flat it was almost entirely quiet. All his windows overlooked

sections of flat roof and bits of gables and the wild untended garden at

the back. The gardens down here were wildernesses except one and it

was neat with mown lawn and rosebeds. Most nights, after it got dark,

which happened late, he saw two eyes, bright as green flames, staring up

at him out of the dense foliage of the ivy that climbed unrestrainedly

overwall and trellis. Old Chawcer went to bed early, he supposed.

Because the house stood alone no sound could ever be heard from

neighbors. If you slept in the front part, you might sometimes be woken

by the shrieks and shouts and bursts of music from cars he'd heard

someone call the new cries of London. In the back where he was there

was little to disturb you. A child of his time and one who had grown up

on a noisy housing estate, he would occasionally have welcomed audible

signs of life outside. Here the silent hours passed by as if time and the

world had forgotten all about you. Except for the Westway. Like a great

gray centipede it marched across west London on its hundred concrete

legs, its ceaseless moving burden making sea sounds.

He opened the fridge door. An obsessively tidy person, he thought he

had left his Boot Camp precisely in the center of the middle shelf and two

inches in from the front. It was very unlike him to have put it on the lefthand side, pushed up against a Tesco chocolate log. Thoughtfully, he

sipped it. He must have been in a hurry to get out, that was the

explanation.

His drink half-consumed, he stood in front of Nerissa's picture and said

to it, said to her, "I love you. I worship you." He raised his glass and

drank to her. "You know I adore you."

Chapter 3

Gwendolen Chawcer's home in St. Blaise Avenue had been built in 1860

by her grandfather, her father's father. Notting Hill was countrified then,

with lots of open spaces and new buildings, and was supposed to be a

healthy place to live. The Westway was not to be thought of for another

hundred years, the first section of the London Underground, the

Metropolitan Railway from Baker Street to Hammersmith, would be built

in three years' time, but the site of the street later called Rillington Place

was open land. Gwendolen's father, the professor, was born in St. Blaise

House in the nineties of that century and she herself in the twenties of

the next one.

The neighborhood went down and down. Because it was cheap,

immigrants moved in in the fifties and lived in rundown North

Kensington and Kensal Town, in Powis Square and Golborne Road, and it

was a man from the Caribbean who found the first body in the Christie

case when taking down a wall in the flat he had moved into. Hippies and

flower people lived up there in the next two decades. Ladbroke Grove was

so familiar a part of their lives that they called it affectionately "the

Grove." In their rented rooms and flats they grew cannabis in cupboards

with ultraviolet light inside. They dressed in cheesecloth and the concept

of the Global Village was born.

Miss Chawcer knew nothing of this. It flowed over her. She was born in

St. Blaise House, had no brothers or sisters and was educated at home

by Professor Chawcer, who had a chair of philology at London University.

When she was a little over thirty her mother died. From the first the

professor had been against her taking any sort of job, and what the

professor was against invariably didn't happen, just as what he was in

favor of did. Someone had to look after him. The maid had left to get

married and Gwendolen was a natural to take her place.

It was a strange life she led but a safe one, as any life must be that is

without fear or hope or passion or love or change or anxiety about

money. The house was very large, on three floors, innumerable rooms

opening out of square hallways or long passages, with a great grand

staircase consisting of four flights. When it seemed certain Gwendolen

would never marry, her father had three rooms on the top floor converted

into a selfcontained flat for her, with its own hallway, two rooms, and

a kitchen. The lack of a bathroom had nothing to do with her

disinclination to move in. "What was the point of being up there when

her father was always down in the drawing room and always, it seemed,

hungry for his meals or thirsty for a cup of tea? Her unwillingness to go

up to the top floor started at that point. She only went up there if she

had lost something and had exhausted all other places where it might be.

Nothing had been painted in the rest of the house and no other rooms

had been modernized. Electricity had been installed, but not everywhere,

and the place had been rewired in the eighties because the existing

wiring was dangerous. But where the old cables had been taken out and

the new ones inserted, the walls had been plastered up over the holes

but no redecoration had been done. Gwendolen said herself she wasn't

much of a cleaner. Cleaning bored her. She was happiest when sitting

about and reading. She had read thousands of books, seeing no point in

doing anything else unless you had to. When she shopped for food, she

kept to the old shops as long as she could, and on the departure of the

grocer and the butcher and the fishmonger, she went to the new

supermarkets without registering that the change had affected her. She

liked her food well enough and had made few changes to her diet since

she was a young girl, except that with no one to cook for her she barely

ate hot meals.

Every afternoon, after lunch, she lay down and rested, reading herself

to sleep. She had a radio but no television. The house was full of books,

learned works and ancient novels, old bound copies of the National

Geographic

and
Punch,
encyclopedias long
obsolete,
dictionaries
published in 1906, such collections as The Bedside
Esquire and The
Mammoth Book of Thrillers, Ghosts and Mysteries. She
had read most of
them and some she had reread. She had acquaintances
she had met
through the St. Blaise and Latimer Residents' Association,
and they
called themselves her friends. Such relationships are
difficult for an only
child who has never been to school. She had been away
on holidays with
the professor, even to foreign countries, and thanks to
him she spoke
good French and Italian, though with no chance of using
either except for
reading Montaigne and D'Annunzio, but she had never
had a boyfriend.
While she had visited the theater and the cinema, she
had never been to
a smart restaurant or a club or a dance or a party. She
sometimes said
to herself that, like Wordsworth's Lucy, "she dwelt among
the untrodden
ways," but it was said rather with relief than
unhappiness.
The professor lived on into extreme old age, finally dying
at the age of
ninety-four. For the past few years of his life he had been
incontinent

and unable to walk, but his brain remained powerful and his demands

undiminished. With the occasional assistance of a district nurse, even

more occasionally that of a paid carer, Gwendolen looked after him. She

never complained. She never showed signs of weariness. She changed his

incontinence pads and stripped his bed, thinking only while she did so of

getting through it as fast as possible so that she could get back to her

book. His meals were brought and the tray later removed in the same

spirit. He had brought her up apparently with no other purpose than

that she should housekeep for him while he was middle-aged, care for

him when he was old, and read to keep herself out of mischief.

There had been moments in his life when he had looked at her with a

cool unbiased eye and had acknowledged to himself that she was goodlooking. He had never seen any other reason for a man to fall in love and

marry, or at least wish to marry, than that the woman he chose was

beautiful. Intellect, wit, charm, kindness, a particular talent or warmth

of heart, none of these played any part in his choice nor, as far as he

knew, in the choice made by other intelligent men. He had married a

woman for her looks alone and when he saw those looks in his daughter

he became apprehensive. A man might see them too and take her away

from him. None did. How could such a man have met her when he

invited no one to the house except the doctor, and she went nowhere

without her father's being aware of it and watching her with an eagle

eye?

But at last he died. He left her comfortably off and he left her the house,

now in the eighties a dilapidated mansion half buried among new

mews and closes, small factories, local authority housing, corner

shops, debased terraces, and streetwidening schemes. She was at that

time a tall thin woman of sixty-six, whose belle epoque profile was

growing nutcracker like, her fine Grecian nose pointing markedly toward

a jutting chin. Her skin, which had been very fine and white with a

delicate flush on the high cheekbones, was a mass of wrinkles. Such

skin is sometimes compared to the peel of an apple that has been left

lying too long in a warm room. Her blue eyes had faded to pastel gray and

her once-fair hair, though still copious, was quite white.

The two elderly women who called themselves her friends, who had red

finger-nails and tinted hair and dressed in an approximation of current

fashion, sometimes said that Miss Chawcer was Victorian in her clothes.

This showed only how much they had forgotten of their own youth, for

some of Gwendolen's wardrobe could have been placed in 1936 and some

in 1953. Many of her coats and dresses were of these vintages and would

have fetched a fortune in the shops of Notting Hill Gate where such

things were much prized, like the 1953 clothes she had bought for Dr.

Reeves. But he went away and married someone else. They had been

good in their day and were so carefully looked after that they never wore

out. Gwendolen Chawcer was a living anachronism.

She had cared for the house less well. To do her justice, she had

determined a year or two after the professor died that it should be

thoroughly redecorated and even in places refitted. But she was always

rather slow in making decisions and by that time she reached the point of

looking for a builder, she found she was unable to afford it. Because she

had never paid National Insurance and no one had ever made

contributions for her, the pension she received was very small. The

money her father had left paid annually a diminishing return.

One of her friends, Olive Fordyce, suggested she take a tenant for part

of the top floor. At first Gwendolen was appalled but after a time she

gradually came around to the idea, but she would never have taken any

action herself. It was Mrs. Fordyce who found Michael Cellini's

advertisement in the Evening Standard, who arranged an interview and

who sent him round to St. Blaise House.

Gwendolen, the Italian speaker, always addressed him as Mr. Chellini

but he, the grandson of an Italian prisoner of war, had always

pronounced it Sellini. She refused to change: she knew what was correct

and what was not if he didn't. He would have preferred that they should

be Mix and Gwen, as he lived in a world in which everyone was on firstname terms, and he had suggested it.

"I think not, Mr. Cellini," was all she had said.

It would probably have killed her to be called by her given name, and as

for Gwen, only Olive Fordyce, much to Gwendolen's distaste, used that

diminutive. She called him, not her tenant, or even "the man who rents

the flat," but her lodger." When he mentioned her, which was seldom, he

called her "the old bat who owns the place" but on the whole they got on

well, largely because the house was so big and they rarely met. Of

course, it was early days. He had been there only a fortnight.

At one of their very occasional meetings he had told her he, was an

engineer. To Miss Chawcer an engineer was a man who built dams and

bridges in distant lands, but Mr. Cellini explained that his job was

servicing workout equipment. She had to ask him what that meant and,

not being very articulate, he was obliged to tell her she could view similar

machines in the sports department of any large London store. The only

London store she ever went to was Harrods and when next there she

made her way to view the exercise equipment. She entered a world she

didn't understand. She could see no motive for setting foot on any of

these devices and scarcely believed what Cellini had told her. Could he

have been, to use a rare example of the professor's inverted-commassurrounded slang, "pulling her leg"?

Every so often, but not very often, Gwendolen went around the house

with a feather duster and a carpet sweeper. She pushed this implement

halfheartedly and never emptied its dust container. The vacuum cleaner,

bought in 1951, had broken down twenty years before and never been

repaired. It sat in the basement among old rolls of carpet, the leaf from a

dining table, flattened cardboard boxes, a gramophone from the thirties,

a stringless violin of unknown provenance, and a basket off the bicycle

the professor had once used to ride to Bloomsbury and back. The carpet

sweeper deposited dirt as regularly as it picked it up. By the time she

reached her own bedroom, dragging the sweeper up the stairs behind

her, Gwendolen had grown bored with the whole thing and wanted to get

back to whatever she happened to be reading, Balzac all over again or

Trollope. She couldn't be bothered to take the carpet sweeper back

downstairs so she left it in a corner of her bedroom with the dirty duster

draped over its handle; sometimes it would remain there for weeks.

Later that day, at about four, she was expecting Olive Fordyce and her

niece for tea. The niece she had never met, but Olive said it would be

cruel never to let her see where Gwendolen lived, she was "absolutely

mad about" old houses. Just to spend an hour in St. Blaise House would

make her ecstatic. Gwendolen wasn't doing anything special, apart from

rereading LePere Goriot. She'd go out in a minute and buy a swiss roll

from the Indian shop on the corner and maybe a packet of custard

creams.

The days when that wouldn't have been good enough were long gone.

Years had passed since she had baked or cooked anything more than,

say, a scrambled egg, but once every cake eaten in this house, every pie

and flapjack and eclair, had been made by her. She particularly

remembered a certain swiss roll, the pale creamy-yellow
sponge, the
raspberry jam, the subtle dusting of powdered sugar. The
professor
wouldn't tolerate bought cakes. And tea was the favorite
meal of all three
of them. Tea was what you asked people to partake of if
you asked them
at all. When Mrs. Chawcer was so ill, was slowly and
painfully dying, her
doctor on his regular visits was always asked to stay to
tea. Her mother
upstairs in bed and the professor giving a lecture
somewhere, Gwendolen
found herself alone with Dr. Reeves.
Falling in love with him and he with her, she convinced
herself, were
the most important events of her life. He was younger
than she was but
not much, not enough, Gwendolen thought, for her
mother to put him
beyond the pale on grounds of age. Mrs. Chawcer
disapproved of
marriages in which the man was more than two years
younger than the
woman. In appearance Dr. Reeves was boyish with dark
curly hair, dark
but fiery eyes and an enthusiastic expression. Though
thin, he ate
enormously of Gwendolen's scones with Cornish cream
and homemade
strawberry jam, Dundee cake and flapjacks, while she
picked delicately
at a Marie biscuit. Men didn't like seeing a girl guzzle,
Mrs. Chawcer

said--had almost stopped saying now her daughter was over thirty.

Before tea, between mouthfuls and afterward, Dr. Reeves talked. About

his profession and his ambitions, about the place in which they lived, the

Korean War, the Iron Curtain, and the changing times. Gwendolen talked

about these things too, as she had never talked to anyone before, and

sometimes about hoping to see more of life, making friends, traveling,

seeing the world. And always they talked about her mother dying, how it

wouldn't be long, and what would happen afterward.

Doctors' handwriting is notoriously unreadable. Gwendolen scrutinized

the prescriptions he wrote for Mrs. Chawcer, trying to decipher his first

name. At first she thought it was Jonathan, then Barnabas. The nearest

she got was Swithun. Cunningly, she turned the conversation on to

names and how important or unimportant they were to their possessors.

She liked hers, so long as no one called her Gwen. No one? Who were

these people who might inadvertently create for her a diminutive? Her

parents were the only ones who didn't call her Miss Chawcer. She said

none of this to Dr. Reeves but listened avidly for his contribution.

Out it came. "Stephen's the sort of name that's always allright to have.

Fashionable at the moment. For the first time, actually. So, one day, maybe, folks will guess I'm thirty years younger than I am."

He always called people "folks." And he said "guess" the American way, meaning "think." Gwendolen loved these idiosyncrasies. She was

delighted to find out his name. Sometimes, in the solitude of her

bedroom, she mouthed to herself interesting combinations: Gwendolen

Reeves, Mrs. Stephen Reeves, G. M. Reeves. If she were American she

could call herself Gwendolen Chawcer Reeves; if from parts of Europe,

Mrs. Doctor Stephen Reeves. To use the servants' word, he was courting

her. She was sure of that. What would be the next step? An invitation

out somewhere, her mother would probably say. "Will you come with me

to the theater, Miss Chawcer? Do you ever go to the pictures, Miss

Chawcer? May I call you Gwendolen?

Her mother no longer said anything. She was comatose with morphine.

Stephen Reeves came regularly and every time he had tea with

Gwendolen. One afternoon, across the cakestand, he called her

Gwendolen and asked her to call him Stephen. The professor usually

came home to keep an eye on his daughter as they were finishing their

portions of Victoria sponge, and Gwendolen noticed that Dr. Reeves

reverted to Miss Chawcer when her father was present.

She sighed a little. That was half a century ago and now it wasn't Dr.

Reeves but Olive and her niece who were expected for tea. Gwendolen

hadn't invited them for this day, she wouldn't have dreamt of it. They had

asked themselves. If she hadn't been tired at the time and even more

tired of Olive's company she would have said no. Wishing she had, she

went up to the bedroom that had once been her mother's, where in fact

her mother had died, but not the one where she had tried out those

name combinations, and put on a blue velvet dress with a lace insert at

the neckline, once but no longer called a modesty vest. She added pearls

and a brooch in the shape of a phoenix rising from the ashes and put her

mother's engagement ring on her right hand. She wore it every day and

at night put it in the jewel box of silver and chased mirror glass, which

had also been her mother's.

The niece didn't come. Olive brought her dog instead, a small white

poodle with ballet dancer's feet. Gwendolen was annoyed but not much

surprised. She had done this before. The dog had a toy with it like a child,

only this plaything was a very life like white plastic bone. Olive ate two

slices of the swiss roll and a great many biscuits and talked about her

niece's daughter while Gwendolen thought what a good thing it was the

niece hadn't come or there would have been two of them talking about

this paragon, her achievements, her wealth, her lovely home, and her

devotion to her parents. As it was, her day was spoiled. She should have

been alone, to think about Stephen, to remember--and perhaps to plan?

Olive was wearing a trouser suit in bright emerald green and a lot of

mock-gold jewelry. Kitsch, Gwendolen called it to herself. Olive was too

fat and too old to wear trousers or anything in that color. She was proud

of her long fingernails and had lacquered them the same scarlet as her

lipstick. Gwendolen stared at lips and nails with the critical and mocking

eye of a young girl. She often wondered why she had friends when she

rather disliked them and didn't want their company.

"When my great-niece was fourteen she was already five feet ten inches

tall," said Olive. "My husband was alive then. 'If you grow any more,' he

said to her, 'you'll never find a boyfriend. The boys won't go out with a girl

taller than them.' And what do you think happened? When she was

seventeen and over six feet she met this stockbroker. He'd wanted to be

an actor but they wouldn't have him because he was six feet six, far too

tall for the theater, so he went into stockbroking and made a packet. The

two of them were quite an item. He wanted to marry her but she had her

career to think of."

"How interesting," said Gwendolen, thinking of Dr. Reeves who had

once said she was a nice girl and he was awfully fond of her.

"Girls don't have to get married these days like we did." She seemed to

have forgotten Gwendolen's single status and went on blithely, "They

don't feel they're left on the shelf. There's no status to marriage anymore.

I know it's a bold thing to say but if I was young again, I wouldn't get

married. Would you?"

"I never did," said Gwendolen austerely.

"No, that's true," Olive said as if Gwendolen might have been in some

doubt about it. "Maybe you did the right thing all along."

But I would have married Stephen Reeves if he'd asked me, Gwendolen

thought after Olive had gone and she was clearing up the tea things. We

would have been happy, I would have made him happy, and I'd have got

away from Papa. But he had never asked her. Once he had said he was

fond of her, Papa seemed to have made a point of being there, though he

could not have overheard. When her mother was dead Stephen signed

the death certificate and said that if they wanted Mrs. Chawcer cremated

they would need a second doctor's signature, so he'd ask his partner to come round.

He didn't say he'd enjoyed all those teas they'd had together or that he'd

miss them or her. Therefore she knew he'd comeback. Probably there

was some rule in medical etiquette that forbade a general practitioner

asking the relatives of a patient to go out with him. He was planning on

coming back, waiting till after the funeral. Or perhaps he meant to come

to the funeral. Gwendolen went through several series of agony because

she had omitted to ask him to the funeral. That too might be in the

medical etiquette rule book. She couldn't ask her father. They were both

supposed to be grieving too much to ask each other anything like that.

Dr. Reeves didn't come to the funeral. It was at St. Mark's, and apart

from Gwendolen and her father, only three other people were there: an

old cousin of Mrs. Chawcer's, their current maid, who came because she

was religious, and the old man next door in St. Blaise Avenue. Since he

hadn't been at the funeral, Gwendolen was sure Stephen Reeves would

just turn up at the house one day. He was leaving it for a little while

out of respect for the dead and the mourners. During that week she spent

more time, trouble, and money on her appearance than she had ever

done before or since. She had her hair cut and set, she bought two new

dresses, one gray and one dark blue, she experimented with makeup.

Everyone else piled it on, especially about the lips and eyelids. For the

first time in her life she wore lipstick, bright red, until her father asked

her if she'd been kissing a fire engine.

Dr. Reeves never came back.

Chapter 4

For the third time in a week, Mix sat in his car on Campden Hill Square

with the windows shut and the engine running to keep the airconditioning on. It was a hot day and getting hotter every minute. He felt

like a stalker and didn't much like it, partly because it reminded him of

Javy. When he was twelve Javy had caught him looking through a pair of

binoculars that belonged to his elder brother and beaten him for being a

peeping Tom. Useless to say he hadn't been looking at the woman next

door but at someone's new motorbike parked by the curb.

Forget it, he said to himself, put it out of your mind. He always said

that when he started thinking of his mother and Javy and life at home

but he never really forgot it. Reading Christie's Victims would have passed

the time while he waited, but he might get immersed in it and miss her.

It must be half an hour he'd been there, waiting for her to come out,

keeping his eye on her front door or shifting it to the golden Jaguar

parked on her drive. Of course he'd seen her on previous visits but it had

always been with some man escorting her or she'd been dressed in one of

those semitransparent shifts she liked so much, under a fur wrap or

sequin-embroidered denim jacket, or else in skin-tight jeans and stilt

heels that permitted only small mincing steps. On those occasions she

got into the chauffeur-driven limo.

It wouldn't be long before a traffic warden appeared and moved him on.

Having a client in Campden Hill Square would have been a help but he

didn't. Judging by the bronzed, taut muscled young men who called at

several of these houses, the residents mostly had personal trainers. He

was wondering if there was any point in staying, he had several calls to

make before lunchtime, when a woman out walking a dog banged on the

car window. She had a cigarette in her hand and the dog, not much

bigger than a Beanie Baby, was wearing a red collar with a diamante tag

hanging from it. They were all rich round here.

"You know," she said in a voice like Colette Gilbert-Bamber's, "it's very

wrong of you to sit there with your engine on like that.
You're polluting
the environment."

"How about you with your smoke?" The combination of
waiting about

and her voice made him angry. "Why don't you get lost
and take that toy
on a lead with you?"

She said something about how dared he and marched off
, dropping

ash. He was on the point of giving up when Nerissa came
out of her front

door and got into her own car. She wore a rose-pink
sleeveless top and

white jeans, her hair tied on the top of her head with a
pink silk ribbon.

Mix thought she looked lovelier than ever, even in the big
black shades

that half covered her face. Casual suited her. But what
kind of fashion
didn't?

To follow her was essential, even if it made him late for
the appointment

he had at twelve in Addison Road. He'd give the woman
there a call and

say he'd been held up. Nerissa drove into Notting Hill
Gate and turned

up toward the Portobello Road but avoided it and went on
to Westbourne

Grove. For once, there was very little traffic, nothing to
separate his car

from her car or hold them up. Roadworks at the top
slowed them both

and he saw her put her head out of the window in an
attempt to see what

was going on. But finally they were through the barriers and past the

cones. More suddenly than he expected--she didn't signal--she swung

the car into a metered space in a side street, dropped in her coins and

ran up to a door with the number 13 Charing Terrace on it and

"Shoshana's Spa and Health Club" in big chrome letters. By then, staring

after her, he was holding up a stream of traffic. A chorus of hooting and

yells of rage from other drivers at last forced him to move.

He was ten minutes late for the woman in Addison Road. All the way to

the back of this big house and down the basement stairs, she lectured

him on punctuality as if she were his employer, not his client. Mix nearly

told her that, in his opinion, the damage to the climbing machine was

caused by disuse, not wear and tear, and he wasn't surprised when he

looked at the shape and size of her. But he didn't. She had an elliptical

cross-trainer on order from Fiterama Accessories, and if he was rude

she'd withdraw her custom.

Nothing like that mattered now he'd found the gym Nerissa went to. Pity

about the number though. Along with his other occult beliefs and fears,

Mix was superstitious, especially about walking under ladders and the

number thirteen. He always avoided having anything to do with it when

he could. When this phobia or whatever it was had started he didn't

know, though it was true that Javy, whom his mother had married on

the thirteenth of the month, had his birthday on the thirteenth of April.

The day he had beaten Mix so badly it had nearly killed him had very

likely been the thirteenth, but Mix had been too young then to remember

or even to have known.

The Cockatoodle Club in Soho was overheated, smelled of various kinds

of smoke and Thai green curry and was none too clean. So, at any rate,

said the girl who Ed's girlfriend Steph had brought along for Mix. Ed was

another rep-engineer at Fiterama and Mix's friend, Steph his live-in

partner. The other girl kept running her finger along the chair legs and

under the tables and holding it up to show everyone.

"You remind me of my gran," said Steph.

"A place where people eat ought to be clean."

"Eat! Chance'd be a fine thing. It's a good three-quarters of an hour

since we ordered those prawns."

The other girl, whose name was Lara, and who had hay fever or

something that made her sniff a lot, resumed her fingerdusting of the

area below their table. Steph lit a cigarette. Mix, who didn't approve of

smoking, calculated that it was her eighth since they had come in here.

The music, which was hiphop, was too loud for normal speech, and to

make yourself heard you had to shout. How Steph managed with her

damaged lungs, Mix didn't know, imagining the villi all lying prone in

there. Just as the waitress appeared with curried prawns for the girls

and cottage pie for the men, Lara's questing finger touched his knee and

was pulled away as if he'd stung her.

They exchanged resentful looks. What with the noise and this awful girl

and the cottage pie smelling as if green curry had got into it, Mix felt like

going home. He wasn't very old, but he was too old for this. Lara said a

waitress dressed like that was an insult to all the women patrons.

"Why? She's lovely. I love her skirt."

"Yes, you would, Ed. That's my point. More like a belt than a skirt, if

you ask me."

"I didn't ask you," Ed yelled at the top of his voice. "As for insults, I'm

only looking, I'm not going to screw her."

"You wish."

"Oh, shut up," said Steph, taking Ed's hand affectionately.

No one was much enjoying themselves. But they stayed. Ed bought a

bottle of Moravian champagne and he and Steph tried to dance, but the

tiny floor space was too crowded, not just to move but to keep upright.

Lara started sneezing and had to use her table napkin for a tissue. They

didn't leave till two. That was the earliest any of them felt the heavens

wouldn't fall if they went home. Mix got into one of his fantasies, a

vindictive one this time, in which he gave a lift to Lara but instead of

driving her home to Palmers Green--that was a fine distance at this time

of night for a bloke who lived in Notting Dale—he imagined taking her up

to Victoria Park or London Fields and pushing her out of the car to find

her own way home. If by that time she hadn't been the prey of the

homicidal maniacs who allegedly haunted those places. Reggie, he

thought, Reggie would have dealt with her.

They proceeded in silence up to Hornsey, Mix imagining Reggie luring

her to Rillington Place on the grounds of curing her hay fever with his

inhaler, which would actually gas her. He'd make her sit in his deckchair

and breathe in the chloroform ...

"Why have you been so horrible?" she asked him after his distant "Good

night" and opening of the passenger door for her. He didn't answer, but

turned his face away. She let herself in through the front door of number

thirteen--it would be—and banged it loudly after her. There were

probably at least ten other occupants of that building and all of them

would have woken up. It seemed to Mix that the place was still

reverberating when he got back into the driving seat.

The night was cold and out here the wind screens of parked cars had

frost on them. He didn't know the area very well, missed his turning and,

after driving for what seemed like hours, found himself around the back

of King's Cross station. Nevermind. He'd take the Marylebone Road and

the fly over. Day and night it was busy. Traffic never ceased. But the side

streets were deserted, the lamps which should have cheered them

making them seem more stark and less safe than darkness.

He had to drive up and down St. Blaise Avenue and up again before he

found a space in the residents' parking to put his car. If he left it on the

yellow line he'd have to be out there before eight-thirty in the morning to

move it. At this hour of the night, the street was packed with cars and

empty of people. It was so dark between the pillars and inside the portico

that it took him awhile to find the lock and slide the key into it.

Crossing the hall, he saw himself in the big mirror like a stranger,

unrecognizable in the dimness. All the lights on staircase and landings

were on time switches and turned themselves off, he'd calculated, after

about fifteen seconds. The bulbs in the hanging lamps in hall and stairs

being of very low wattage, great pools of darkness lay ahead in the twists

and bends. Cursing the length of this staircase, he began to climb. He

was very tired and he didn't know why. Perhaps it had something to do

with the emotional stress of tracking down Nerissa and discovering

where she went, or it was due to that Lara who was such a contrast to

her. His legs dragged and the calf muscles began to ache. After two

flights, at the first landing, where Miss Chawcer slept behind a big oak

door set in a deep recess, the lights grew even dimmer and went out

faster. It was impossible to see the top of the next flight. From here the

floor above was lost in dense black shadow.

The place was so big and the ceilings so high that it had a creepy feel

even on a bright day. By night the flower and fruit carvings on the

woodwork turned into gargoyles and in the silence he seemed to hear soft

sighs coming from the darkest corners. Mounting slowly because he was

as usual panting, here called, as one does in such situations, his halfbelief in ghosts. He had often said, of some particular old house, that he

didn't believe in ghosts but he wouldn't spend a night there for anything.

The habit he had got into of counting the stairs in this top flight as if he

could make the figure twelve or fourteen was hard to break. He seemed

to do it automatically once he had pressed the switch at the foot. But he

had reached only to three when he seemed to see, in the light's feeble

gleam, a figure standing at the top. It was a man, tallish, glasses on its

beaky nose catching the colored light from the Isabella window.

The sound that rose to his mouth came out as a thin whimper, the kind

you utter in a bad dream when you think you are screaming loudly. At

the same time, he squeezed his eyes shut. With one hand stretched out,

he stood there until a darkening inside his eyelids told him the light had

gone out again. He took a step backward, pressed the switch again,

opened his eyes and looked. The figure was gone. If it had ever been

there, if he hadn't imagined it.

It still took all the nerve he could summon to go up those stairs past

the spot where it had stood and across the spots of Isabella light to let

himself into his flat.

A bright morning and the terrors of the night were dispelled by sunshine.

Mix was having a lie-in because it was Saturday. He lay in bed in the

stifling warmth of his overheated bedroom, watching a flock of pigeons, a

single heron flying low, an aircraft leaving a trail like a string of cloud

across the blue sky. Now he could tell himself the figure
on the stairs

was a hallucination or something caused by that stained
glass window.

Drink and darkness played strange tricks on the mind. He
had drunk

quite a bit and that house where she lived being thirteen
was the last
straw.

Getting up to make tea and take it back with him, he saw
Otto far

below, a dark chocolate silhouette, sitting on one of the
crumbling walls

against which ancient trees leaned and from which an
ancient trellis

drooped. In the almost identical wilderness at the end of
this garden, two

guinea fowl with crinolines of gray feathers pattered
among dead weed

stalks and brambles. Otto spent hours watching these
guinea fowl,

plotting how to catch and eat them. Mix had often
watched him,

disliking the cat but half hoping to witness the hunt and
the kill. Keeping

the birds was almost certainly illegal but the local
authority remained in

ignorance of their existence and no neighbor ever told.

He lifted out of a drawer his Nerissa scrapbooks and took
them back to

bed with him. This bright morning would be a good time
to take a

photograph of her house and perhaps another of the
health club. And

there would be a chance of seeing her again. Turning the
pages of this

collection of Nerissa pictures and cuttings, he slipped into a fantasy of

how he could meet her. Really meet her and remind her of their previous

encounter. A party would be the sort of occasion he wanted, one that she

was attending and to which he could get himself invited. A niggling fear

crept into his mind that she might have spotted him outside her house

and known it was he following her to the health club. He must be more

careful.

Could he persuade Colette Gilbert-Bamber to give a party? More to the

point, could he persuade her to invite him to it if she did? The husband,

whom he'd never met, was an unknown quantity. Mix had never even

seen a picture of him. Maybe he hated parties or only liked the formal

kind, full of business people drinking dry wine and fizzy water and

talking about gilts and a bear market. Even if the party happened, would

he have the nerve to ask Nerissa out? He'd have to take her somewhere

fabulous, but he'd started saving up for that, and once he'd been seen

out with her--or, say, three times--he'd be made, the TV offers would

start rolling in, the requests for interviews, the invitations to premieres.

He must hedge his bets. He'd call the health club this morning and ask

about joining. Suppose he found out who her guru was, or her

clairvoyant or whatever? That would be easier than a party. He knew she

had one. It had been in the papers. He wouldn't have to be invited to a

guru's place. He could just go, provided he paid. There were ways of

finding out when Nerissa's appointments were and then somehow he

would get his to precede or follow hers. It wouldn't be all pretending

either, it wouldn't just be a ploy. He wouldn't mind seeing someone who

knew about the supernatural. If there really were ghosts and spirits and

whatever or if sighting them was always in the mind. A guru or a

medium could tell him.

Mix finished his tea, closed the scrapbook, and forced himself to walk

over to the long mirror that was a cheval-glass framed in stainless steel.

He shut his eyes and opened them again. There--nothing and no one

behind him, what a mad idea! Naked, he confessed to himself that there

was room for improvement. In his job and with his ambition, he ought to

have a perfect figure, a six-pack belly, fleshless hips, and a small hard

bum. Once it had been like that-and would be again, here solved. All

those chips and chocolate bars were to blame. His face was all right.

Handsome, according to Colette and others , the features regular, the

eyes a steady honest blue. He could tell they admired his fine head of

light brown hair with the blond highlights, but his skin ought not to be

so pale. She would be used to men of perfect physique and magnificent

tan. The gym was the answer to that, and the tanning place round the

corner. He couldn't see his back, but he knew the scars were all gone

now, anyway. Pity, really. He still nursed a fantasy that had begun when

his back was still bleeding, of showing someone--the police, the social

services--what Javy had done and seeing him handcuffed and taken

away to prison. It was either that or killing him.

For five years Mix had been his mother's darling. He was her only child,

his father a boyfriend who had moved out when he was six months old.

She was only eighteen and she loved her little son passionately. But not

enduringly or exclusively, for when Mix was five she met James Victor

Calthorne, fell for a baby and married him. Javy, as everyone called him,

was big and dark and handsome. At first he took very little notice of Mix

except to smack him and at first it seemed to the boy that his mother

loved him as much as ever. Then the baby was born, a dark-eyed, darkhaired girl they called Shannon. Mix couldn't remember feeling much

about the baby or seeing his mother pay her more attention than she

paid him, but the psychiatrist they made him go to when he was older

told him that was his trouble. He resented his mother withdrawing her

love from him and transferring it to Shannon. That was why he tried to

kill--thebaby.

Mix remembered nothing about it, nothing about picking up the tomato

ketchup bottle and hitting her with it. Or not quite hitting her. Bashing

inside the cot but missing. He couldn't remember Javy coming into the

room, but he remembered the 'beating Javy gave him. And his mother

standing there and watching but doing nothing to stop him. He had used

the leather belt, from his jeans, pulling Mix's T-shirt over his head,

lashing at his back till it bled.

That never happened again, though Javy went on smacking him

whenever he didn't toe the line. Apart from the psychiatrist talking about

it, the only way he knew he had tried to kill Shannon was because Javy

was always telling him. He got on quite well with his little sister and with

the babyboy, Terry, who was born a year later, but if ever Javy caught

him even disagreeing with Shannon or taking a toy away from her, he'd

repeat that story and say how Mix had tried to kill her.

"You'd be dead by now," he'd say to his daughter, "but for me stopping

that murdering kid." And to his little son, "You want to watch him, he'll

kill you as soon as look at you."

That would be a way to get famous, Mix sometimes thought, killing

one's stepfather out of revenge. But Javy had left them when he was

fourteen. Mix's mother wept and sobbed and had hysterics until Mix got

fed up with it and slapped her face.

"I'll give you something to make you cry," he had shouted in his anger.

"Standing there and watching him beat me up."

They sent him to the psychiatrist for hitting his mother. A domestic

violence perpetrator waiting to happen--that was the description he

overheard one social worker call him. She was still alive, his mother, not

yet fifty, but he'd never see her again.

It was Saturday, so he could park more or less anywhere he could find a

space in Westbourne Park Road. As it happened he got on to the same

eter as Nerissa had used. Mix was besotted enough to get a thrill out of

that, just as he would have from touching something she had touched or

reading some sign she had read hours before. He went up to the door and

rang the lowest one of a series of bells. The door growled open on to an

unprepossessing hallway smelling of incense, a steep and narrow

staircase, and a smart new lift, all steel and glasslike his mirror. It took

him up a couple of floors where, to Mix's relief, everything was like itself,

streamlined, glittering, and sleek. Doors opened off the hallway, labeled

Reflexology and Massage and Podiatry. The gym was full of young people

laboring away on treadmills and skiers and stationary bikes. Through a

big picture window he could see girls in bikinis and men looking the way

he wanted to look, either in or sitting round the edge of a large bubbling

Jacuzzi. A thin dark girl in a leotard with an open white coat over it

asked him what he wanted. Mix had had an idea. He explained his trade

and asked if anyone was needed to service and maintain the machines.

His company would consider taking Shoshana's on.

"It's funny you should say that," said the girl, "because the guy who was

going to do ours let us down yesterday."

"I think we could fit you in," said Mix. He asked what rates the

defaulters had charged. The answer pleased him. He could undercut

that. And he began to think daringly of taking it on privately, strictly

against the company's rules, but why should they find out?

"I'll have to ask Madam Shoshana." She had a faltering voice and the

bright nervous eyes of a mouse. "Would you like to give me a call later?"

"I'll do that small thing. What's your name then?"

"Danila. "

"That's a funny one," he said.

She looked about sixteen. "I'm from Bosnia. But I've been here since I

was a kid."

"Bosnia, right." There had been a war there, he thought vaguely, back

some time in the nineties.

"I was afraid for a moment you wanted to join," said Danila.

"We got a waiting list as long as your arm. Most of them don't come more

than four times--that's the usual, four times—but they're on the books,

aren't they? They're members."

Mix was interested in only one member. "I'll call you later," he said.

Suppose Nerissa was here now? He wandered along the aisle between

the machines. Small television transmitters hung at head height in front

of each one and all were showing either a quiz show or a very old Tom

and Jerry cartoon. Most were watching the cartoon while pumping or

pedaling away. She wasn't there. He wouldn't have had to look closely.

She stood out from others like an angel in hell or a rose in a sewer. Those

long legs, that gazelle's body, that raven hair must cause a sensation in

here.

Contemplating going to a film, later a drink with Ed in the Kensington

Park Hotel, the pub Reggie had used and called KPH, he thought of the

figure he had hallucinated on the stairs. Suppose it wasn't a

hallucination but a real ghost? Suppose it had been Reggie? His ghost,

that is. His spirit, doomed to haunt the environs of where he'd once lived.

Mix knew Reggie didn't really look like Richard Attenborough; or like

himself, come to that. He'd looked quite different, taller and thinner and

older. There were plenty of photographs in his books. Mix became very

frightened when he tried to conjure up an image of the man on the stairs.

Besides, he couldn't do it. He just about knew it was a man and not very

young and maybe wearing glasses. Yes, he couldn't have made up the

glasses, could he? They couldn't have been in his mind.

Reggie might have been in St. Blaise House while he was alive. Why

not? Miss Chawcer had escaped him, but he might have come there after

her. Mix, who thoroughly knew the details of Reggie's life after he came to

Notting Hill, pictured her going to Rillington Place, as it then was, for an

abortion, but getting cold feet and running away. A lucky escape. Had

Reggie tried to persuade her to let him do the deed at her ownplace? No,

because he had to get rid of the body. He went there to get her to return

...

Were there ghosts and if so, was it the murderer whose spirit he had seen? Why had he come back? And why there and not to Rillington Place, which had been the graveyard for so many dead women? Why not was pretty obvious. He wouldn't know the place after what they'd done to it, his three-story Victorian house and all the others like it razed to the ground. All those smart new rows, the trees and the cheerful atmosphere would have put him off ever returning. He could have gone to the place in Oxford Gardens where his first victim, Ruth Fuerst, had had a room. She was the one whose leg bone they had found propping up the fence in Reggie's garden. Or to that of his second, Muriel Eady, who had lived in Putney. But St.Blaise House was nearer and unchanged. He would like that, a house just the same as it had been in the forties and fifties. He'd feel comfortable there, and besides, he still had unfinished business to attend to. She was old now but he wasn't. He was the same age as when they'd hanged him and would always be. What more likely than that he had come back to find old Chawcer and take her back with him to wherever he came from? Don't think like that, stop it, Mix said to himself as he climbed the fiftytwo stairs, you'll frighten yourself to death.

Chapter 5

In her house in Campden Hill Square, Nerissa Nash was getting ready to

go to her parents' for supper. If it had been her mum alone she was going

to see, say when her dad was at work, she would have put on jeans and

boots and an old jumper under her sheepskin. But her dad liked to see

her dressed up, he took such pride in her.

Though she had no idea of this, her life was one they didn't begin to

understand. If not everyone could lead it, she supposed everyone would

want to. It was bounded by the body and the face, hair--lots of it on the

head and none anywhereelse--clothes, cosmetics, aids to beauty,

homoeopathy, workouts, massage, sparkling water, lettuce, vitamin

supplements, alternative medicine, astrology and having her fortune told,

the images and activities of other celebrities, her mum and dad and her

brothers and sisters. Of music she knew very little, of painting, books,

opera, ballet, scientific advances, and politics she knew nothing and

wasn't interested in them. Taking part in fashion shows, she had visited

all the major capitals of the world and seen of them only the studios and

changing rooms of designers, the insides of clubs and gyms, the

premises of masseurs, and her own face in the mirrors of cosmeticians.

But for one lack in her life, she was extremely happy.

From both parents, somewhere in the genes, she had inherited a sunny

disposition, a faculty for enjoying simple pleasures, and a kindly nature.

People said of her that Nerissa would do anything to help a friend.

Almost everything she did she enjoyed. Especially delightful was sitting

at her huge dressingtable, a white cotton cape covering her Versace

trouser suit, her long hair looped back, making up her face. On the CD

player Johnny Cash was singing her favorite song, loved by her because

it was her dad's preference over all others, the one about the teenage

queen, prettiest girl they'd ever seen, she who loved the boy next door,

who worked at the candy store. Nerissa identified with this successful

beauty in most respects.

Her dad liked her hair hanging loose, so she left it that way. If only it

had been cold, she could have worn her new fake fur that was made to

look like Arctic fox. No real fur for her, she loved animals too much. The

very thought made her shudder. But no, it had better be something thin

and silky. Dropping the cape on the floor, she inadvertently swept off the

dressing table the lid of a pot and three earrings. What should she take

her parents? She should have bought something but she'd been working

out most of the day and hadn't got around to it.
Nevermind. Two bottles

of champagne came out of the drinks cupboard and a jar
of cocktail

sticks fell out, scattering everywhere. Next that huge box
of chocolates

Rodney had given her--he was so sweet but was he crazy,
thinking she'd

so much as look at a chocolate?

Nerissa left a trail of litter behind her through the house.
Even the

flowers toppled out of the vases. Magazines tumbled out
of the rack,

handfuls of tissues spilled onto surfaces and under
tables, lamps fell

over, glasses broke, and odd bits of jewelry glinted from
the carpet pile

and the windowsills. Lynette, who came to clean, was so
well paid she

didn't mind. She went about the house, picking
everything up, admiring

a ring here, a bottle of scent there, and if she was at
home, Nerissa

would give it to her.

It was raining, the heavy crashing rain of summer.
Nerissa put on her

white shiny raincoat over her silk shift and leapt into the
car with her

champagne and her chocolates, her wet umbrella-white
and with a

picture of the seafront at Nice on it--slung onto the
backseat. She

stopped in Holland Park on a double yellow line to buy
flowers for her

mum, orchids and arum lilies, roses and funny green
things the florist

couldn't identify. Luck was with her, as it usually was. All the wardens

were indoors watching Casualty on TV: She was going to be late--when

wasn't she?--but Dad wouldn't mind. He liked eating closer to nine than eight.

They lived in Acton, in a street of semidetached mock-Tudor houses,

theirs with an extra bedroom over the garage. Nerissa and her brothers

had grown up there, gone to the local schools, visited the local cinema,

and shopped at the local shops. Both of her brothers were older than

Nerissa and both were now married. When she started to make a lot of

money, she had wanted to buy her parents a house near her own,

perhaps a smart cottage in fashionable Pottery Lane, but they would

have none of it. They liked Acton. They liked their neighbors and the

neighborhood and their big garden. All their friends lived nearby and

they were staying put. Besides, her father had made three ponds in his

garden, one in the front and two in the back, and filled them with

goldfish. Where in Pottery Lane would he be able to have three ponds or

even one? And the goldfish were very active tonight, enjoying the rain.

It was her father who answered the door. Nerissa threw her arms

around him, then around her mother, presented her gifts. These were, as

always, received rapturously. She never touched alcohol, she drank

bottled water, but now she accepted with pleasure a large cup of

Yorkshire tea. You could get very fed up with water thrust at you

wherever you went. Her mum always announced dinner in the same way,

and uttered it in an atrocious French accent. Nerissa would have

wondered what was wrong if she had deviated from this practice.

"Mademoiselle est servie. "

She only ate food like this when she went to her parents' house. The

rest of the time she picked at grapefruit and Japanese rice crackers at

home or green salad in restaurants. It was a miracle, she sometimes

thought, that her insides could weather with no ill effects the shock of

digesting thick soup, rolls and butter, roast meat and potatoes, batter

pudding, and Brussels sprouts. Her mother thought this was her normal

diet.

"My daughter can eat as much as she likes," she told friends.

"She never puts on a scrap of weight."

When they had reached the apple charlotte and baked Alaska stage of

the meal, Nerissa asked her mother about their neighbors. These people

were great friends, as close as cousins.

"Fine, I think," her mother said. "I haven't seen much of them for a few

days. Sheila's got a new job, I do know that---oh, and Bill's got the allclear from the hospital."

"That's good. " Nerissa trod warily. "And the son? He's still living at home?"

"Darel?" her dad said. "Such a nice well-mannered boy. He's still at

home, but Sheila told me he's buying a flat in Docklands. Time to move on, he says."

Nerissa was unsure whether this was good news for her or bad. While

she was having dinner with her parents, she always hoped Darel Jones

would come to the door to beg a couple of teabags or return a borrowed

book. He never had, though according to her mother, they and the

Joneses were always "in and out of each other's houses." She thought of

him next door, watching television with his parents or maybe out

somewhere with another girl. The latter was more likely for a very

handsome and charming young man of twenty-eight. She sighed and

then smiled to stop her parents noticing.

Guilt seldom troubled Gwendolen. To her mind she led, and had always

led, a blameless life of absolute integrity. Entering a tenant's flat in his

absence and exploring it seemed to her a landlord's right and if she

enjoyed it, so much the better. The only drawback was her need to rest

and take deep breaths between flights.

What a lot he drank! An empty gin bottle and one which had contained

vodka and four wine bottles had been put into the recycling box since

she was last up here. It was evident he didn't eat much at home, the

fridge was again nearly empty and smelling of antiseptic. A large leatherbound book lay on the coffee table. Because she could hardly pass a

book without opening it, Gwendolen opened this one. Nothing but

photographs of a black girl in very short skirts or swimming costumes.

Perhaps this was what they meant by pornography; she had never really known.

A copy of the previous day's Daily Telegraph was beside the book.

Gwendolen rather liked the Telegraph and would have bought it herself if

it hadn't been so ruinously expensive. It puzzled her that Cellini had

bought it. One of those tabloids was surely more his mark, and she

wouldn't have been surprised to learn that he had been given this copy.

Ed had seen an article in it about fitness machines, which especially

singled out Fiterama for mention, and passed it on to Mix.

Just as she couldn't pass a book without opening it, so Gwendolen

found it impossible to see the printed word without reading it. Some of it,

that is. Ignoring the fitness machine article, she read the front page, then

the next page, managing fairly well but wishing she had her magnifying

glass with her. When she reached the births, marriages, and deaths,

she laid the paper down and went to the door to listen. He hardly ever

came back in the middle of the day, but it was as well to be careful. How

tidy everything was! It amused her to think that of the two of them he

with his cleanliness and fussy ways would be called an old woman while

everyone saw her as cultivated and urbane, more like a man really.

She wasn't much interested in marriages and births, she never had

been, but she ran her eye-pushed and strained her eye really-down the

deaths column. People no longer had any stamina and many younger

than herself died every day. Anderson, Arbuthnot, Beresford, Brewster,

Brown, Carstairs--she had once known a Mrs. Carstairs who lived down

the road, but it wasn't her, she was called Diana, not Madeleine. Davis,

Edwards, Egan, Fitch, Graham, Kureishi. There were three Nolans, very

odd that, it wasn't a common name. Palmer, Pritchard, Rawlings, Reeves-Reeves!

How extraordinary and what a coincidence. This was the first time she

had looked at the Telegraph for months and what should she find but the

announcement of his wife's death. For it certainly was his wife.

On 15 June, at home, Eileen Margaret, aged 78, beloved wife

of Dr. Stephen Reeves of Woodstock, Oxon. Funeral 21 June

at St. Bede's Church, Woodstock. No flowers. Donations to

cancer research.

This small print was terribly hard to read but there was no doubt about

it. Would he notice if she cut it out of the paper? Possibly, but what

could he do about it if he did? Now to find the scissors. Her own might be

in the bathroom cabinet or the oven--seldom used, it made a useful

cupboard--or somewhere in the bookshelves, but an old woman like him

would keep his in a neatly arranged drawer along with such gadgets as

potatopeelers and bottle openers. He would be sure to have several of

those.

Gwendolen poked about in Mix's kitchen, paying particular attention to

the microwave, whose function was a puzzle to her. Did toast come out of

it or music? It might even be a very small washing machine. She found

the scissors exactly where she thought they would be and cut out the

announcement of his wife's death. Downstairs she would be able to study

it at leisure with the aid of her magnifying glass.

She was only just in time. As she was descending the bottom flight he

let himself in by the front door.

"Good evening, Mr. Cellini."

"Hiya," said Mix, thinking about her getting pregnant and going for help

to Reggie. "How are you doing? All right?"

When he phoned the spa the girl called Danila told him Madam

Shoshana agreed to his servicing the machines. Perhaps she would like to

come along some time and bring one of his contracts with him. Mix

concocted on his computer a contract with Mix Maintenance as its

headline--he was rather proud of that--and printed out two copies.

Instead of being modified by the passage of time, his fear increased as

the days went by. He had never seen the figure on the stairs again,

though he fancied sometimes that he heard noises that shouldn't have

been there, footsteps in the long passage, a curious rustling sound like

someone taking crushed paper out of bags or stuffing it into them, once a

strain of music, though that might have come from the street. By night

he had to screw up his courage in order to let himself in. And those

stairs he had always hated were worse.

Reaching St. Blaise House, he forced himself to put his key into the lock

and enter the hall, the dim light coming on. Try not to think about it, he

told himself as he began to mount, think about Nerissa and about getting

fit, the way she'd like you to be--why not get yourself an exercise bike?

Fiterama will let you have it at cost. Go for walks, lift weights. He was

always telling clients what marvelous physical benefit they'd get from

using the machines. Tell yourself, he thought. And try to be glad about

these stairs. Going up them is good exercise too.

Like a kind of therapy, this worked until he came to the landing below

the tiled flight. Feeble light, filtered through tree branches and foliage

and the grime on the glass, seeped through the Isabella window and

touched him with spots of color as he walked up. It lay on the top floor

like a pattern done in smudged chalks and quite still on this windless

night. Two long black passages stretched away from the landing,

empty and silent, all the doors closed. He switched on the light once

more, staring fearfully down the left-hand passage as the cat appeared

from out of a door which came open and closed of its own accord. He saw

its green eyes glinting as it walked in unconcerned fashion toward him,

hissed as it passed him and made for the stairs.

Who or what had opened the door? He plunged into his flat, fumbling

for the lightswitch but at last turning it on. The sudden brightness made

him let out his breath in a long, relieved sigh. He'd heard of cats learning

to open doors, though these in the flat had knobs, not handles. It might

be different out there. Going to look was out of the question. The door in

question must have a handle, and Otto, who was clever if evil, had

learned to stand on his hind legs and apply to it the pressure of his clawy

paw. Who had closed it? Doors close of their own accord, he told himself.

It happens all the time.

A cheerful film on television, a not-so-old Hollywood musical, a mug of

hot chocolate with a drop of whiskey in it, and three Maryland cookies

finished the job of reassurance. Still, once he started on his fitness

regimen, all that sort of eating and drinking would have to stop. It was

warm in the flat but not too hot, 27 degrees. That was the kind of

temperature he liked. Warmth, sweet filling food, a thick soft mattress,

lazing around, doing nothing--why were all the nice things bad for you?

The cat and its eyes were banished for the duration of the musical.

Above his head, outside his front door, he could hear no sound, and

when the television was off the silence was disturbed only by the sighing

of traffic on the Westway. He felt better. He congratulated himself on his what was the word?-resilience. But in bed, with the bedside lamp off, he

thought of the cat and the door again and, although there could be

nothing to see, kept his eyes shut against the darkness.

Chapter 6

The next morning he woke up to awareness that he had been frightened

the night before and for a moment he had to think why. But fear and the

memory of fear began to fade when he saw the sunshine and heard

children playing in the garden next door to the guinea fowl man. Otto

must have opened the door himself and it must have shut behind him of

its own volition. He got up, had a shower and, telling himself it was a

good start to a workout program, set off for a walk. But before starting he

went rather cautiously along the passage toward the door of the room the

cat must have come out of. Sure enough, the doors down here had

handles. He left, unreasonably relieved, more as if he'd just had a

wonderful piece of news instead of only finding out what he already knew

was true.

Now for a walk. Blow the cobwebs away in more senses than one, let

unlight and energy into his life. There was a big Catholic church near the

convent and, about to march on past it, he stopped for a moment to

watch the people going in to mass. A lot of people, more than he'd have

thought likely. A kind of regret came into his mind and a wistfulness.

Those people wouldn't have his problems, his doubts and fears. They had

their religion, they had something to turn to, something or someone to

bring them comfort. If they saw a ghost or heard footsteps and doors

closing, they'd call out the name of their god or utter the appropriate

curse. In stories, that usually worked. He had had religion when he was

small and his grandmother was alive to take him to church. But that was

long ago and it was all gone now. He'd not thought about it since and

didn't believe in any of it. If he went in there and along with them asked

someone up in the sky for help, he'd feel such a fool, he'd be

embarrassed. Much the same went for asking their vicar--their priest?

Mix couldn't imagine how he'd explain to the man or what the man

would answer. It was beyond him.

On Monday and Tuesday he was busy at work and for once was relieved

he had work to do. There was a new treadmill coming to a ground-floor

flat in Bayswater that he had to set up and demonstrate. Half a dozen

steps on that and he was breathless, in spite of his walks. Then all the

calls for help with breakdown equipment to answer, e-mails,

complaining or demanding. On the second evening he managed a visit to

Shoshana's Spa and Health Club, where he told Danila he was making

a survey and a servicing plan. This was to put her off the scent. Because

he was really looking for Nerissa. He was on the point of asking Danila

about her, which were her days for coming to the club, was she a regular

visitor, that kind of thing, but he decided it would sound funny. It would

sound as if his contracting to look after the club's machines was no more

than a ploy to meet the famous model--as indeed it was. He handed over

a copy of his contract and left.

On Wednesday evening he went to the Coronet cinema with Ed and

Steph and afterward to the Sun in Splendour for a drink. When the men

each had a gin and tonic in front of them and Steph a vodka and

blackcurrant, he asked her what he'd been planning, in fact rehearsing,

saying to her all day. The elaborate, hedging-of-bets, covert way of asking

a simple question got lost and he came out with a few simple words.

"Do you believe in ghosts, Steph?"

She didn't laugh or scoff. "There's more things in heaven and earth ... "

she began but couldn't remember the rest. "I think, like, if there's been

an awful thing like a murder in a place, the dead person or the killer--well,

they may come back and revisit the scene of the crime. It's their energy,"

she went on vaguely, "it kind of hangs around and makes the person well, materialize."

Just what he thought. He was going to ask her about the mysterious

opening and shutting of that door, but then he remembered the cat had

done it. "Would it have to be the scene of the crime? I mean, where

someone died? Could it be a place where another crime was committed?"

"She's not an expert, Mix," Ed said. "She's not a medium."

Mix took no notice. "Suppose it was a murderer who'd tried to do

another murder but it went wrong? Would he come back to the place

where it went wrong?"

"He might," Steph said rather dubiously, and then, "Look, is this really

happening? That funny old place you live in, is it haunted or what?"

"Funny old place" was right, but Mix didn't much like someone else

calling it that. It seemed an insult to his beautiful flat. "I reckon I may

have seen--something," he said carefully.

"What sort of something?" Ed was agog.

The more sensitive and perhaps intuitive Steph read the expression on

Mix's face. "He doesn't want to talk about it, Ed. I mean, would you? You

know what Ed said, Mix. You need help."

"Do I?"

"Look, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll let you have a loan of this and you can

drive the thing away with it if it comes again." She unfastened the Gothic

cross of purple and black stones that hung round her neck from a silver

chain. "Here, you have it."

"Oh, no, I might lose it!"

"Not the end of the world if you do. It only cost me fifteen quid. And my

mum says I shouldn't wear it, she says it's what's the word, Ed?"

"Blasphemous," said Ed.

"That's it, blasphemous. My mum knows a medium and she said it

would work. If I needed it. She said any cross would work."

Mix studied the cross. He thought it ugly, the stones so obviously glass,

the silver so evidently nickel. But it was a cross and as such might do

the trick. If he threw it at Reggie or even if he only held it up in front of

him, the ghost might melt away like a spiral of smoke or a genie going

back into a bottle.

Gwendolen had found a plastic bone in her bedroom. At first she couldn't

think what it was doing there or where it had come from and then she

remembered Olive's little dog playing with it. She offered it to Otto, who

shrank away with an expression of contempt on his face, as if repelled by

the smell of dog. The bone wrapped up in a sheet of newspaper and put

inside the washing machine for safekeeping, she waited for Olive to

phone and complain about her loss.

With the diminishing of her income, Gwendolen had become very

careful with money and disliked spending it on unnecessary phone calls.

If Olive wanted her animal's toy, let her phone or come around and fetch

it. But the days went by and there was no call and no visit. Gwendolen

used the washing machine only when she had accumulated a stack of

dirty laundry. When this happened she nearly washed the bone and the

newspaper, stuffing the clothes in before she noticed. There were a

number of small Asian-run shops as well as the bigger grocers in

Ladbroke Grove and Westbourne Grove where she did her shopping,

carefully comparing prices--every single penny piece counted--before

making up her mind. To reach any of them she had to pass the block of

flats where Olive lived. Putting on her good black silk coat with the tiny

covered buttons, now some thirty years old, and an all round straw hat

because the day looked warm, she set off with the bone in the bottom of

her shopping trolley. This was covered in Black Watch tartan and, being

only nine years old, quite smart still.

Dropping in on Olive, she rang her bell in the lobby. No answer. Nor did

the porter get an answer when she asked him to phone Mrs. Fordyce in

11C. He thought he had seen her go out. Gwendolen was extremely

annoyed. It was feckless leaving your rubbish in other people's houses

and then giving no sign of the social solecism you had committed. She

was tempted to drop the bone in its wrapping into the nearest litter bin

but a niggling doubt about the validity of doing that stopped her. It might

amount to stealing.

After reading, Gwendolen liked shopping best of what she did. Not

because of what she bought or the layout of the shops or the friendliness

of staff but solely on the grounds of comparing prices and saving money.

She was no fool and she knew very well that the amounts she saved on a

tin of gravy powder here and a piece of Cheddar cheese there would

never amount to more than, say, twenty pence a day. But she

acknowledged to herself that it was a game she played and one that

made trekking all the way over to the Portobello Road market or up to

Sainsbury's a pleasure rather than a chore. Besides, crossing Ladbroke

Grove, if she followed a certain route, took her past the house where, all

those years ago, Dr. Reeves had had his surgery. By now the pain had

gone from her memories of him and only a rather delightful nostalgia

remained, that and a new hope, brought about by the announcement in the Telegraph.

Just after the war the Chawcers had thought of going to Dr. Odess. The

first symptoms of Mrs. Chawcer's illness had showed themselves about

that time. But Colville Square was rather a long walk away, while Dr.

Reeves was in Ladbroke Grove and reached by simply taking Cambridge

Gardens. It wasn't till the trial and all the publicity in the newspapers

that Gwendolen discovered Dr. Odess had been Christie's doctor and had

attended him and his wife for years.

She was tempted to go up to the market this morning. The sun was

shining and flowers were out everywhere. The council had hung baskets

of geraniums on all the lampposts. I wonder what that costs, thought

Gwendolen. Sometimes when she went to the market for her vegetables,

her cooking apples, and her bananas--the only fruit Gwendolen ever ate

were bananas and stewed apple--she was able to save a lot and

sometimes have forty pence more than she expected in her purse at the

end of the day. She stopped outside the four-story house with basement

and with steep stairs climbing to the front door, where Stephen Reeves

had practiced. It was run-down now, its paint peeling, a pane in a front

bay window broken and patched up with a plastic Tesco bag and tape.

Inside there had been the waiting room where she had sat and waited

for prescriptions for her mother. In those days doctors had no lights and

bells to signify they were ready to receive the next patient, often no

receptionist or nurse on the premises. Dr. Reeves used to come to the

waiting room himself, call out the patient's name, and hold the door open

for him or her to pass through. Gwendolen never minded how long she

had to wait for the prescription to be handed to her for he would do this

himself and might come two or three times into the waiting room to

receive the next patient before he did so. She knew he only did this so

that he could catch glimpses of her and she have sight of him. He always

smiled and the smile for her was different from those directed at others,

warmer, wider, and somehow more conspiratorial.

It was as if they shared a secret, as indeed they did-their love for each

other. She hadn't minded having to leave the surgery on her own. He

would be at St. Blaise House in a day or two and then they would be

alone, having tea and talking, talking, talking. To all intents and

purposes they were alone in the house. Bertha, the last maid, was long

gone, and by this time domestic workers wanted higher wages than the

Chawcers could afford. Mrs. Chawcer was asleep, or certainly immobile,

upstairs. The professor might be home by five but seldom before,

threading his way on the old bicycle through the increasing traffic on the

Marylebone Road into the complexities of Bayswater and Notting Hill. It

was very quiet in St. Blaise House in the fifties while Stephen Reeves and

Gwendolen sat side by side and talked and whispered, putting the world

right, laughing a little, their hands and knees very close, their eyes

meeting. Because of these sessions and the intimacy that had grown up

between them, because he had once said he was awfully fond of her, she

considered herself irrevocably bound to him. In her mind it was an until-death-us-do-part agreement.

For a long time she had been bitter against him, seeing him as

treacherous, a man who had jilted her. If he had never said he loved her

in so many words, actions spoke louder. Later on, she had looked at the

situation more rationally, understanding that he had no doubt been

entangled with this Eileen before he had met her, or before he had got to

know her, and had perhaps been threatened with an action for breach of

promise. Or her father or brother had threatened him with a horsewhip.

Such things happened, she knew from her reading. Dueling, of course,

was illegal and long since gone out of fashion. But he must have been

inescapably entangled with the woman, so what could he do but marry

her? As for her, Gwendolen, she too was tied to him, as good as his wife.

It was interesting, she thought as she pushed her trolley along

Westbourne Grove, the number of people she had heard of lately who,

widowed or losing their wives in old age, came back to their past and

married the sweetheart of their youth. Queenie "Winthrop's sister was

such a one and so was a certain member of the St. Blaise Residents'

Association, a Mrs. Coburn-French. Of course, Gwendolen was a realist

and had to face the fact that women lost their husbands more often than

men lost their wives. But sometimes women were the first to die. Look at

her father. Not that he had married any long-lost sweetheart, but Mr.

Iqbal from the Hyderabad Emporium had done just that, meeting outside

the mosque in "Willesden a lady he had known from the same village in

India fifty years before.

And now Eileen was dead ...

Stephen Reeves was a widower now. Would he come back for her? If she

had married someone else and that someone had died, she would look

for him. The bond between them must be as fixed and enduring for him

as it was for her. Perhaps she should take steps to find him ... ? He

might be shy, he might even feel guilty about what he had done and be

afraid to face her. Men were such cowards, that was a well-known fact.

Look how squeamish the professor had been about taking on any of the

tending of her mother when she was so ill.

It was half a century since last she had seen Stephen, or it soon would

be. There were ways of finding people these days, much easier and surer

ways than when she was young. You didn't somehow with a computer.

You used this computer and got into something called the "net" or the

"web" and it would tell you. There were places--there was one in

Ladbroke Grove called Internet cafes. For a long time Gwendolen had

thought that meant a place to have coffee in and eat cakes, but Olive,

laughing stupidly, had set her right. If she went to such a place would

she be able to find Stephen Reeves after fifty years?

She thought about all this as she walked home with her shopping. After

he had told her she was a nice girl and he was fond of her, she sat up in

her bedroom and practiced writing her name as it would soon be.

Gwendolen Reeves or G. L. Reeves, she would sign herself, but on

invitation cards she would be Mrs. Stephen Reeves. Mrs. Stephen Reeves

at home and Dr. and Mrs. Stephen Reeves thank you for your kind

invitation but regret they cannot accept ... As it turned out, these last had

been reserved for Eileen. That need not trouble her now, for Eileen was

dead. Somehow she knew it hadn't been a happy marriage, in spite of

that "beloved wife." He had to put it like that, everyone did, it was the

convention. Possibly, when he and Eileen quarreled, as no doubt they

often did, he told her he should never have married her.

"I should have married Gwendolen," he would have said.

"She was my first love."

Gwendolen had never expressed her feelings to him. It wouldn't have

been right for a woman to do that then but things seemed to be different

now. He might not know how she felt, he might never have known.

Somehow she must manage to tell him and then everything would come right.

Chapter 7

He had read Christie's Victims before but a long time ago, six or seven

years ago when he began collecting his Reggie library. Of course he

remembered it. But it was still fascinating to retrace his steps through

the Notting Hill of those days and through the life of one of the most

famous serial killers of all time.

"John Reginald Halliday Christie came to live in London in 1938," Mix

read while eating his breakfast,

and with him came his wife, Ethel. He was a curious man. There must be

something strange, not to say appalling, about any necrophile. Not only is

the idea of necrophilia repugnant to everyone, but in order to indulge his

desire, the sufferer from this aberration must, unless he has unlikely

access to a morgue, first kill his victims.

Looking at it from the perspective of the twenty-first century, Christie's

marriage was not a happy one. Five years after their wedding, Ethel left

him and went to live in Sheffield. Their separation lasted for several years

until Christie wrote to her, asking her to return to him. After their reunion,

she was often away staying with her relatives in the north. Christie had

been a cinema operative, a mill-worker and a postman, in connection with

which last he was sent to prison for stealing postal orders. Imprisoned

again for stealing a car from a Roman Catholic priest who had befriended

him, he nevertheless volunteered for the Emergency Reserve of the London

Police Force and was accepted in the year he and his wife came to

Rillington Place, Notting Hill, west London.

Apparently the police made no inquiries about his past, or if they did their

findings were not serious enough to disqualify him, and in 1939 he

became a full-time Special Constable. Four years later, while still a

policeman, he met the girl who was to be his first murder victim ...

Reluctantly, Mix raised his eyes and slipped a marker in between the

pages. Having told Danila at Shoshana's Spa and Health Club that he

would be arriving at ten to service five machines, he had better go. The

book, by a certain Charles Q.Dudley, was the fourth or fifth he had read

on the Rillington Place murderer and the facts he had just absorbed were

already known to him. This he had expected. What he was looking for

and expected to find, perhaps halfway through the book, was some hint

or suggestion that Christie sometimes visited his prospective victims'

homes. Had he noticed anything of this sort when he read the book for

the first time? He couldn't remember.

Mix was taking the day off in lieu of working on a previous Sunday. It

was useless trying to do the Shoshana job before or after work because

these were the least likely times for Nerissa to be there. Models get up

very late in the mornings, Mix had read somewhere, while their evenings

are occupied with film premieres, clubs, public appearances, and parties

at manorhouses in the Home Counties. When the happy time came, he

fantasized, he and she would lie in together, maybe until midday or later.

A maid would bring breakfast, but not before eleven, and when it came it

would be what he had ordered, buck's fizz, caviar on toast, and eggs benedict.

He returned to reality and recognized that parking was going to be a

problem. He knew that before he got there. Eventually he found a meter

and paid for two hours, but it was a long way from the health club. He

told himself that all this walking must be improving his figure. Arriving

on the dot often, he turned his eyes away from the chrome number

thirteen and got quickly into the lift. Glancing round the girls and a couple

of young men working out, he saw at once that Nerissa wasn't among

them. Probably it was a bit early for her. His fussy eye appraised Danila

and he decided that though skinny and scared, she wasn't so bad.

Knowing her better might help him in his quest.

"Madam Shoshana said to ask you not to fiddle about with the

machines the clients are using. I'm only telling you what she said."

"You can trust me," he said. "I know what I'm doing."

"And she says not to use any oil or stuff like that because if it gets on

the clients' gear they're going to go ballistic. It's what she said, not me."

"I only use invisible fat-free oil," Mix lied.

He had brought three new belts with him and spanners for adjusting

the parts. Shoshana's hadn't been open very long, so servicing wasn't

necessary, but he whiled away the time taking ellipticals apart and

checking handlebar positions on stationary bikes. Whatever came out of

it, he was really going to squeeze Madam Shoshana for putting him

through this tedious business. Pity Danila had been told to keep an eye

on him or he'd settle down in a corner and read a bit more of Christie's

Victims.

Danila was very thin. So was Nerissa but hers was a different kind of

thinness. You couldn't see her bones sticking out the way Danila's did.

And Danila's face was like a bird's with a beaky nose and not much chin.

Still, she had great legs and more tangled-up dark hair than Mix could

ever remember seeing on a woman's head. He had almost given up

looking for Nerissa that day. It was eleven-fifteen and if he wasn't going

to get clamped or towed away or whatever they did around here, he had

to be back at the car by ten to twelve.

Danila was sitting behind her counter, drinking a cup of black coffee.

"Would there be another one of those going?"

"There might be, but don't say a word, will you?" She disappeared into

some inner recesses of the club and came back with coffee, a milk jug,

and sweetener in little tubular packs." Here you are. Shoshana'd kill me

if she knew. We're not supposed to give coffee to anyone but staff."

"You're a star," said Mix and got a smile. No time like the present, he

thought, and keeping his eye on the door in case Nerissa did just happen

to come in at eleven-forty, said, "You feel like having a drink? Say

Wednesday or Thursday if you want."

She was surprised. He would have liked her better if she'd taken such

invitations for granted and as her due. "I don't mind," she said, and then,

spoiling it, "Are you sure?"

"I'll pick you up then. Where d'you live?"

"Oxford Gardens." She gave him the number.

"Not far from me," he said. "We'll go to KPH," he said, forgetting she

wouldn't know what those initials meant. "Eight suit you?"

No point, he thought, in spending the whole evening with her. Suppose

Nerissa was one of those clients, the ones she'd talked about last time he

was here, who only came to the club four times and then lost interest. He

mustn't be impatient because she hadn't come today,
she wouldn't come

every day, no matter how keen she was on fitness. Next
week he'd do his

servicing on a Wednesday instead of a Tuesday. And
maybe he'd psych

himself up to walk here. It couldn't be more than a mile.

Olive had forgotten about leaving the bone behind in
Gwendolen's

house, had hunted for it all round the block's communal
gardens and

even grubbed about in various bins outside shops. Kylie,
the little white

dog, had been frantic. So calling on Gwendolen was not
to retrieve the

bone, but to pour out her heart to a sympathetic ear.

Gwendolen's was never that. It was with some
amusement that she

listened to her friend's woes. The bone had been sent to
Kylie by an

American friend who shared Olive's love of poodles. Kylie
had adored it

from the first. Now it was lost and Olive had no idea what
to do, it being

impossible to buy such a toy here. Nor would she dare
write to her friend

in Baltimore, confessing her carelessness and asking for
a replacement.

Gwendolen laughed. "Your troubles are over. It's here."

"Kylie's bone?"

"You left it here. I did call to give it to you but of course
you were out."

If Olive disliked that "of course" she gave no sign of it.
Gwendolen

hunted about for the bone in her dirty cluttered kitchen,
finding it at last

on top of a heap of newspapers dating from the professor's time and

under a twenty-five-year-old pack of vacuum cleaner bags.

"You have made a little dog very happy, Gwen."

"That's a relief."

Gwendolen's sarcasm wasn't lost on Olive, but she was too happy at the

recovery of the bone to take much notice. She went off cheerfully in the

direction of Ridgemount Mansions. Gwendolen, who preferred her own

company to that of her friends, was glad to see the back of her. In the

past few days since she had decided, daringly, to try and find where

Stephen Reeves now was, she had considered asking her tenant for help.

He possessed a computer. She had seen him carrying it one day when

they had met by chance in the hall.

"You'll think I'm asking for trouble carrying this about with me," he had

said, "but I won't leave it on one of the seats. It'll go in the boot."

Gwendolen hadn't thought anything like that as she had no idea what

he was talking about. "What is it?"

He looked at her warily, the way the unthinking look at the mentally

disturbed. "It's a PC, isn't it?" Her blank look was maintained. "A

computer, isn't it?" he said desperately.

"Really?" She shrugged her thin old shoulders. "Then you'd better go

and do whatever you have to do with it."

The information she needed--was it somehow automatically shut up in

that thing in the small flat case? Would all of them provide it? Or did you

have to have a special kind of machine attached to it? And where was the

screen she'd seen on them in shops? She was well aware that Mr. Cellini

had found her ignorance ridiculous and she was anxious not to make a

fool of herself again. Not that there was anything intrinsically foolish in

someone who had read the whole of Gibbon and the complete works of

Ruskin not knowing how these modern inventions worked. Just the

same, she preferred not to ask him. She preferred not asking Olive too. If

she went round to Golborne Mansions she would have to witness Kylie's

ecstasy, hear the tale of the lost bone all over again, and maybe--something she always, unreasonably, dreaded--that paragon of a niece

would be there or her mother.

It would do no harm to visit one of those Internet restaurants--no,

cafes. She was clever, she knew that. Stephen Reeves had called her an

intellectual and even Papa had several times told her she had a good

brain for a woman. Surely therefore she could master the handling of one

of those computers and get it to disgorge its information. She put on her

hat, reflecting on the one Olive had been wearing--bright red grosgrain

to match her nails-then the black silk coat and black net gloves because

it was hot. Papa had given them to her for her fifty-second birthday and it

was wonderful how they had lasted. No need for the trolley today.

It was bright and sunny. All the days this summer were hot and the

temperature was going up. Several young men and girls about the streets

were wearing short-sleeved T-shirts and sandals. One girl had a bikini

top on and a boy appeared to have left his shirt somewhere, for he was

wearing only a vest. Gwendolen shook her head, wondering what her

mother would have said if she had tried going outdoors in her brassiere.

Nerissa had been to the gym, had an all-over body massage and a facial,

and now, once more wearing the dark glasses she had put on to walk

here and not be recognized, she was going upstairs to Madam Shoshana.

The stairs were steep and narrow. Covered in brown linoleum of a

vintage before Nerissa's mother was born, they had metal rims to the

treads, which, coming away in places, made tripping likely and the risk

of a nasty accident great. She trod carefully. A model friend of hers had

fractured her tibia on death-trap stairs and when the break had mended

one ankle was noticeably thicker than the other. The stairs smelled nasty,

like stale cabbage and cheap burgers, in spite of the little window

halfway up being wide open. A very dirty lace curtain blew out and

flapped against Nerissa's face. She was used to it. She came here once a

week to have her future foretold.

A notice on the sagging brown door said: Madam Shoshana, Soothsayer.

Please knock, and below this in straggly ballpoint, (Even if you have

appointment). Nerissa knocked. A low, thrilling voice called out, "Come."

The room was the most crowded and cluttered and stuffed with bric-a-brac that Nerissa ever went in. It was also almost too hot even for her

and she liked heat. Strange things not only filled the shelves and covered

the surfaces but sprouted from the floor and hung from the ceiling.

Artificial plants in pots, mostly cypress trees but lilies too and passion

flowers, stood about like stalagmites while stalactitic rods and chimes

and mobiles and crystal pendants hung from the ceiling. The strangest

thing of all was Madam Shoshana herself, a skinny old woman enveloped

in layers of robes in many shades, but all of them the colors of a stormy

sky, indigo and charcoal, dovegray and slate gray, grubby white and

violet, angry blue and silver. Her waist-length yellowish white hair hung

in straggly locks over her shoulders and down her back, entangling in

places with the silver chains and crystal strings she wore around her

neck. Though she had developed a range of cosmetics that she sold on

the premises at inflated prices, she never wore make up herself and

looked as if she didn't wash her face much. Nerissa thought her nails

looked like birds' talons, not human at all.

The velvet curtains were drawn and, for some reason known only to

Madam Shoshana, pinned together in several places with old-fashioned

brooches of Celtic design. A number of stuffed birds, dominated by a

large white owl, were arranged to stare at the supplicant as she or he

entered the room, but perhaps its most disquieting feature was the figure

of a man in Merlin-like (or Gandalf-like) gray robes, holding inexplicably

a staff of Aesculapius. This waxwork stood behind Madam Shoshana as

she sat at her wide marble table as if advising her on ancient lore,

witchcraft, necromancy, astrological prognostication, or whatever she

might require. A single low-wattage table lamp, vaguely art nouveau in

design, all pewter and dullstained glass, gave the only light.

On the marble table was arranged a ring of crystals, rose quartz,

Iceland spar, amethyst quartz, olivine schist, basalt, and lapis lazuli, in

the center of which lay a small round lace matlike a crocheted doily.

Shoshana's chair was of ebony inlaid all along the back and arms with

white and yellow crystals, but the chair provided for the client was the

Windsor type, plain wood, here and there stained with what looked like

blood but was probably tomato ketchup.

"Sit."

Nerissa knew the routine and obeyed. At Madam Shoshana's command

she laid her hands, manicured that morning, the nails lacquered a

slightly paler gold than the skin of her fingers, on the lace mat in the ring

of stones. Shoshana gazed at Nerissa's hands and let her eyes rove in

circles from crystal to crystal, rather like a cat following a moving spot of

light.

"Tell me which of the sacred stones you can feel drawn closer to your

fingers? Which two are gradually drawing toward you?"

It was a source of dismay to Nerissa that she could never feel, and

certainly not see, any of the crystals moving. She was always reproached

for this failure. Madam Shoshana seemed to imply it was due to some

insensitivity on her part or to lack of concentration. Certain she would

once more be found wanting, she said, "I think it's the dark blue one and

the pink one."

"Try again."

"The dark blue one and the green one."

Shoshana shook her head, more in sorrow than in anger. Some of her

clients she had known for years, but she never retreated them with any

more friendship or intimacy than she had done on their first visit. She

looked at Nerissa as if she had never seen her before.

"The basalt and the amethyst are in your Ring of Fate today."

Shoshana's voice sounded as if it came from a long way off and long in

the past. So might a mummy sound if it could speak. "Both are pushing

hard to break the energy barrier between themselves and your fingers.

You must relax and let them come. Relax now and bid them approach you."

Many times before had Nerissa been through this routine. She tried to

let her hands go limp, but she was very aware of the white owl and the

gray-robed waxwork staring at her, she thought, accusingly. "Come,

come, come," she intoned. It suddenly occurred to her that this was

exactly what an arrogant former boyfriend used to whisper to her while

they were making love, and she bit her lip to stop herself giggling.

"Concentrate," said Shoshana sternly.

Nerissa thought how frightened she would be if she actually saw the

basalt and the amethyst move at her bidding. But only Madam Shoshana

could see that happening. She began to speak.

"Your fateful balance is badly out of truth. The stones speak of

confusion, doubt, and fear. They tell me of a dark man, his name

beginning with a D. He is your fate, for good or ill. His destiny is to live

by water ... You are pushing the stones away--ah, too late. They have

ceased to speak. You see how they shrink as the soul comes out of

them."

The stones looked the same to Nerissa but she knew that was due to

her spiritual blindness. Shoshana had told her so on previous occasions.

She was too worldly, the soothsayer had said, too preoccupied with her

own appearance, with possessions and with artifacts. She wasn't sure

what "artifacts" meant, and although she meant to look the word up she

always forgot. The stuffed birds and the wizard figure were all looking at

her with contempt. Nerissa cast her eyes down, humiliated.

The session was over. Her homework was to pay close attention to the

man whose name began with a D and to water with creatures swimming

in it, though not fish. She stood up and felt in her bag for her wallet.

Madam Shoshana on her feet was rather different from Madam Shoshana

sitting down. She became more practical and businesslike, less aware of

the soul and more of the pocket.

"Forty-five pounds, please, no euros and no credit cards," she said, as if

the client had never been before.

Nerissa left and walked thoughtfully along Westbourne Grove. When

Madam Shoshana said that the dark man was her fate, her heart had

leapt for she was sure she must mean Darel Jones. But suppose she

hadn't, suppose she had meant Rodney Devereux?

She could have asked but she'd known it would have been useless.

Shoshana would only have said the stones told her no more and implied

that this was Nerissa's fault for obstructing them with her energy. As for

the water, immediately to mind came the Pacific Rim restaurant Rodney

loved and where he was always taking her, though Nerissa didn't like

watching the fish swimming about in the huge mirror-backed tanks and

ten minutes later eating one of them. She couldn't tell why it was different

from just buying fish at Harrods Food Hall and having it later, but

somehow it was.

Still, this must be what Shoshana had meant, speaking of it so soon

after mentioning the man with the initial D. Of course she had specifically

said not fish, but there were other things in those tanks, snails with

colored shells and little creeping things and a creature like a water

snake. Last time they'd been there she was afraid Rodney would eat the

snake and that made her queasy. She'd been on the point of saying to

him that she'd never go to Pacific Rim again, but for some reason she

hadn't. Now she'd have to go there. It was her fate.

Christie's first victim, as far as is known, was a young woman of Austrian

origin called Ruth Fuerst. She had been a nurse, but when Christie first

met her in 1943 was working in amunitions factory and as a part-time

prostitute. Whether he first met her while a policeman on the beat or in a

cafe or pub is a matter of doubt, but he claimed that she came to see him

in Rillington Place while Ethel Christie was at work in Osram's factory.

No one involved in the case could say if he ever visited her in the single

room she rented at 41 Oxford Gardens.

Mix looked up from the book, keeping his finger on thepage. What an

amazing thing! Although he had read everybook on Christie he could get

hold of, mainly from hunting through secondhand bookshops, none of

them had stated precisely where Ruth Fuerst had lived. But here it was,

a few houses along the street from the address Danila had given him. If

only it had been the same house, he thought with a stab of regret. If only

she had had the same room! He imagined going back there with her,

maybe screwing her in the very place .. Still, what he'd discovered made

going out with her quite an exciting experience rather than a chore.

He read on. "Christie killed Ruth Fuerst one day in the middle of

August. 'She undressed,' he said, 'and wanted me to have intercourse

with her.' " In his book 10 Rillington Place, which Mix had among the rest

of his library, Ludovic Kennedy, writing that their relationship developed

gradually, suggests that it was far more likely she had a straightforward

transaction with him, prostitute and client, or granted her favors as

his price for not reporting her soliciting in his capacity as a

special constable.

"During sexual relations, he strangled her with a piece of rope. Then he

wrapped her leopard--skin coat round her"--a fur coat in August!--"took

her into the front room and placed her under the floorboards with the

rest of her clothes.

"That same evening, Ethel, who had been away in Sheffield with her

relations, arrived home with her brother Henry Waddington, who

intended to stay the night. Because they had only one bedroom and that

was occupied by Christie and Mrs. Christie, Henry Waddington slept in

the front room, a few feet away from the temporarily interred body of Ruth

Fuerst ... "

Mix had to stop there. He was calling for Danila at eight and he meant

to leave early in order to stand outside and contemplate the house where

that first victim had lived. Number 41 Oxford Gardens was on the other

side of Ladbroke Grove, rather shabby, much in need of painting and

general refurbishment. No doubt it would now be worth some enormous

sum, incredible to its wartime occupants if any of them were still alive. A

cat, rather like Otto but older and with a gray muzzle, came over the wall

and stopped when it saw Mix staring. Mix shooed it and made a face, but

it was streetwise and experienced. It gave him an inscrutable look and

strolled slowly into a clump of bushes.

Had Reggie ever stood where he was, then making up his mind, gone up

the path and rung the bell? There may have been other occasions when

he came here before that final fatal meeting. Hadn't the author of the

best-known book on Reggie suggested they had known each other for a

long time? Very probably all his relationships with his victims developed

gradually. It stood to reason he must sometimes have gone to their

places. After all, Ethel Christie was usually at home in Rillington Place

and he couldn't always just have met them in cafes and pubs.

Mix was growing more and more convinced that Reggie had visited

Gwendolen at St. Blaise House. When he first began renting the flat, she

had mentioned in passing her mother and father with whom she had

lived in those far-off days and she had also mentioned her mother's

death soon after the war. The father would have been working as a

professor, whatever that meant, certainly that he'd be away from home.

Mix could imagine Gwendolen letting Reggie in, taking him into the

kitchen for a cup of tea--snob that she was--while they talked about the

abortion, her need for it and his ability to perform the operation. Perhaps

she couldn't afford the fee Reggie asked, but Mix couldn't remember

reading anywhere that he evercharged ...

Approaching the house where Danila lived, at two minutes after eight,

he found her waiting for him just inside the frontgate. This didn't please

him, as it was too much of a sign of desperation. He would have

preferred her to keep him waiting, even if it had been half an hour. But

now she was with him, dressed up to the nines as his gran used to say,

in skin-tightleather trousers, a frilled shirt, and a fake leopard-skin

jacket. Just like Ruth Fuerst, he thought, and he wondered if Fuerst had

looked like this, skinny and dark and sharp-featured. He tried to recall if

he'd ever seen photographs of her. They walked up to Ladbroke Grove

and the Kensington Park Hotel.

He loved KPH, not because there was anything special about it but

because all those years ago Reggie had used it. It was historic. They

ought to have a sign up telling the clientele that it had once been the local

of west London's most infamous killer. But when you had people

ignorant enough to pull down Rillington Place and destroy all signs of

that celebrated site, what could you expect?

"You're very quiet," said Danila, a vodka and blackcurrant in front of

her. "Kayleigh'd want to know if the cat had got your tongue."

It was an unpleasant reminder of Otto. "Who's Kayleigh?"

"The girl who does the evening shift at the spa. She's my friend." When

Mix made no reply, she said eagerly--or desperately?--"I had my fortune

told today."

Mix was going to say he'd no time for that and it was a load of rubbish

when he remembered reading how Nerissa patronized faith healers,

fortune-tellers, and had some guru. Besides, he half believed in ghosts

now, didn't he? "I reckon there maybe something in it. There's lots of

things we don't know, aren't there? I mean, some of them'll turn out to

be scientific all along."

"That's exactly what I say. Madam Shoshana at the spa does mine.

She's the boss but she's a soothsayer too, got all sorts of qualifications,

letters after her name and all."

"What did she say?"

"You mustn't laugh. My fate's bound up with a man whose name starts

with a C. And I thought, I wonder if it's achap who does the pedicures at

the spa. He's called Charlie, Charlie Owen."

Mix laughed. "It might be me."

"Your name begins with an M."

"Not my surname."

"Yeah, but that's an S."

"No, it's not. I ought to know. It's C, E, double L, I, N, I."

She stared into his face. "You're kidding."

"D'you want another drink?" he said.

On the way back to Oxford Gardens he bought two bottles of California

white, cheap-offer bin ends, in the wine shop. They drank it on her bed

and afterward Mix didn't think he acquitted himself very well. But what

did it matter? They were both drunk and she wasn't the sort of girl for

whom you felt you had to put up a good performance. Outside her door,

the floor and the ceiling rocked like the waves of the sea, rising and

sinking and quivering. Heading for the stairs, clutching the banisters, he

stumbled and nearly came to his knees, his jacket falling forward over

his head. Adjusting it as best he could and starting down,
he passed a

man coming up who stood back, unmistakably flinching
at a blast from

his breath. Another tenant, his fuddled mind conjectured,
Middle

Eastern chap, sallow face, black mustache, they all
looked the same. He

didn't look back to see the Middle Eastern chap pick up a
small white

card from the landing outside Danila's room.

Mix shambled home through the close humid night.
Colder air might

have sobered him up a bit but this was like a lukewarm
bath. Otto was

on the stairs again, washing his face as if he'd just been
eating

something. To Mix there was something odd and perhaps
not pleasant

about the cat being up here on the stairs so much. It
never happened

when he first came. Their dislike was mutual, so he
wasn't the

attraction. What was?

Chapter 8

Nerissa was having a party. None of her own friends was
invited, not

Rodney Devereux or Colette Gilbert-Bamber or the model
whose ankle

had ended up thicker than the other one, but only her
own family and all

its extensions. The only outsiders she asked were the
Joneses from next

door to her parents. She sent one of her beautiful purple
cards, lettered

in gold, to Mr. and Mrs. Bill Jones and Mr. Darel Jones, and
at the foot

she wrote in white ink: Do come, love, Nerissa.

A nice enough, but rather cold, letter came back from
Sheila Jones. It

said they couldn't come and that she was sorry, but not
why they

couldn't. Nerissa had no very high opinion of her own
intelligence but

even she could read between the lines that Mrs. Jones
thought the party

would be too grand for them with too many smart people
attending, too

much fashion on show and too much talk about things
they wouldn't

understand. Nerissa was disappointed and not just
because the refusal

included Darel. The senior Joneses were the sort of
people she liked,

straightforward, unassuming, and down-to-earth.

If only they understood the sort of party it really was,
given for her dad's

birthday (which she'd said on the invitation) and that his
brothers would

be there with their wives, the seven children they had
between them, his

cousin who was a leading light in the Transport and
General Workers'

Union, her mum's younger sister, elected last year to
Tower Hamlets

Council, her mum's elder sister who met and married the
sweetheart she

hadn't seen for a lifetime, her mum's auntie from Notting
Hill, her three

baby nieces and her three-year-old nephew, and her
grandma, the

matriarch born just ninety-two years ago in Africa.

It was the Joneses' loss, Nerissa said defiantly to herself as she and

Lynette handed round cups of tea to those who didn't want champagne

cocktails. But she admitted silently that it was her loss too, and when

Lynette and the TGWU cousin had moved some of the furniture back and

dancing began, she imagined the happiness she might have had in

Darel's arms, drifting gently round the floor. To make things worse, just

as her grandma was telling her an enthralling tale about her own mother

and a witch doctor, the phone rang. It was Rodney. Nerissa took the

phone into the study and listened impatiently while he asked her why he

hadn't been asked to the party and was she mad, entertaining all those

relations?

"It's a well-known fact that everyone hates their parents," said Rodney.

"You know what what's-his-name said. 'They fuck you up, your mum and

dad.' "

"Mine didn't. And whoever it was said it, they were sick."

"For God's sake, leave them to it, and I'll pick you up in five minutes."

"I can't, Rod," said Nerissa. "My dad's just going to cut the cake."

She went back to the party and fed the little ones chocolate biscuits and

ice cream because none of them liked fruitcake.

"You'll have one like that yourself in a couple of years," said her Tower

Hamlets auntie.

"I wish." Nerissa thought of Darel, out somewhere with his girlfriend, no

doubt. Maybe even getting engaged to her now, while she spoke. "I'll have

to get married first."

"Most of them don't bother anymore," said her auntie from Notting Hillwell, great-auntie really.

"I would," said Nerissa, wiping a small mouth, open, birdlike, for more.

She put on Johnny Cash singing "I Walk the Line," turned up the CD

player, and went to dance with her dad.

Gwendolen would have been horrified and deeply shocked had she

known the fantasies her tenant created about her past life. But she had

forgotten the brief conversation they had had in the hall on the subject of

her visit to 10 Rillington Place. That Mix Cellini had come to believe she

had known Christie as well as Ruth Fuerst or Muriel Eady had known

him, that she had been a frequent visitor to his house and that he had

come here because she needed an abortion, would have humiliated her

beyond words. He had gone further, concluding that because she was

still alive, she must ultimately have refused Christie's offer of an illegal

operation because she couldn't afford to pay for it, and therefore given

birth to a child. A middle-aged man or woman by now--
did he or she ever

come here, had he, Mix, ever seen this mysterious
person? But

Gwendolen, mercifully for her, knew nothing of these
feverish workings of
his mind.

She had been humiliated enough by her visit to the
Internet cafe, where

for a time she received no help from anyone. And she
was utterly in the

dark. Whether other people, all of them very young,
expertly using the

machines, found her bafflement absurd, she couldn't tell,
but she felt

they did, interpreting the half-smile on a face and the
turning away of a

head as signs of amused contempt. Although she had
paid and she hated

wasting money, she would have got up and left,
abandoning forever these

means of finding Stephen Reeves. But just as she pushed
back her chair

in despair a young man who had just come in asked her if
she had a

problem.

"I am afraid I can't seem to make it ... "

"What is it you want to know?" he asked.

Would there be any harm in telling this stranger? She
would never see

him again. And surely he couldn't guess her reason for
searching for

Stephen Reeves? Deciding to confide in him was one of
the biggest

decisions of Gwendolen's long life.

"I wish to discover the--er, whereabouts of a Dr. Stephen Makepeace

Reeves." She sensed that giving Stephen's age would rouse incredulity in

this twenty-year-old, but she couldn't help that. "He would be eighty

years old. He's a doctor of medicine and he once practiced here in

Ladbroke Grove--oh, a long long time ago, fifty years ago."

If her helper found the request an odd one he gave no sign of it. In spite

of her shyness and her very real fear of the computer and what it might

do, she was fascinated by the quick sure way he conjured up one picture

after another on the screen; columns of text, squares of printing, and

boxes of information followed one another, unfolding and rolling, and in

so many different colors. Then, there he was: Stephen Makepeace Reeves,

25 Columbia Road, Woodstock, Oxfordshire, with a phone number and

something the young man said was an e-mail address, and then a kind

of biography of him, telling her when and where he was born, where he

took his medical training, that he had been married to Eileen Summers

and they had a son and a daughter. He had left Notting Hill and become

a partner in a practice in Oxford, where he had remained until his

retirement in 1985. In the years that followed he had written several

books on the life of a doctor in a famous university town, one of which

had been the forerunner of a television series.

His wife, Eileen, had sadly died recently, aged seventy-eight. Gwendolen

sighed happily and hoped the young man didn't notice. All she wanted

now was to be alone, but curiosity remained and she had to know.

"Does everyone have something like that in there?" She pointed with

one finger close to the screen, half afraid, half hopeful, that her own

history might be concealed in its depths.

"Not like that. He's got a website, you see. On account of writing those

books, I guess, and getting that stuff on TV"

Gwendolen hadn't the faintest idea what he was talking about, but she

thanked him and left. She had shopping to do but not just at present,

she couldn't do anything now but think. Mr. Cellini's car, which had

been parked outside when she left, was gone. She was relieved. Although

she and he had little contact, the fact that he was in the house, though

all the way up there in what her mother had called the attics, slightly

interfered with the absolute peace she needed to think in and remember

and plan.

For a while she sat in the drawing room where the dusty

atmosphere and the smells of fabrics uncleaned for half a century, damp,

mildew, flaking plaster, and dead insects combined to remind her

comfortingly of distant happy times. But something that hadn't been

there half a century before, the grind and screech and throb of traffic

passing outside the window, sent her upstairs to her bedroom, where

things were marginally better.

Otto was eating a mouse in front of the fireplace, where ashes from a

fire lit in 1975 still lingered in the grate. He never brought mice to her as

a gift, as most cats would to their owners, but took them to his favorite

places, bit their heads off, and ate as much of the rest of them as he

fancied. Gwendolen took no more notice of him than she had ever done,

apart from putting his food down, since he had walked into St. Blaise

House from nowhere a year before. She kicked off her shoes, lay on the

bed, and pulled the pink silk eiderdown over her feet and legs.

Perhaps she would go to Oxford. Perhaps even, daringly, spend a

weekend there. At the Randolph. That was where Papa always stopped if

he wasn't invited by the master of some college to stay in a set

designated for distinguished guests. While there she would take a taxi out

to Woodstock, though perhaps there was a bus. Taxis were very

expensive. Or write a letter. It was usually best, in these circumstances,

to write first. On the other hand, she had no previous experience of these

circumstances ...

The music she had been vaguely aware of since she came into the

bedroom seemed gradually to increase in volume. It wasn't coming

through the wall but through the ceiling. So Mr. Cellini must be at home

in spite of the absence of his car. Perhaps it had gone to be mended or

whatever one did with cars. She went to the door and opened it, annoyed

but at the same time rather gratified that her tenant liked real music,

after all. Whatever he said, that must have been he playing Lucia the other

day. This time it was a Bach toccata.

Gwendolen would have been incredulous if, before the arrival of Mr.

Cellini, anyone had told her she would tolerate with patience, and even

pleasure, sounds coming from the rented flat. But, really, classical music

was another thing, and she didn't have to pay for the electricity used up

in playing it. So long as he didn't fancy Prokofiev--she couldn't stand

those Russians--she wasn't at all perturbed. Back on the bed, she

imagined coming face to face with Stephen Reeves outside the gates of

Blenheim Palace. He would know her at once, and taking both her hands

in his, tell her she hadn't changed a bit. Then she would show him her

mother's engagement ring she wore in place of the one he hadn't given

her. Perhaps he would slip it off her finger and transfer it to her left

hand. With this ring I thee wed ...

At Shoshana's Spa, Mix attended to the next batch of machines. It was

his fourth visit, he had finished what he was coming to call the "day job"

and got here just before five. On the other occasions he had chosen

morning on his day off, early morning before work, and the middle of the

day in his lunch break, but on none of these visits had he seen Nerissa.

Now there was nothing left to do to these machines for at least six months

and his only excuse for coming back was to see Danila.

If Mix had his way he would never have set eyes on Danila again.

Unfortunately, she very evidently felt the reverse about him. Not an

analyst of character, he nevertheless understood she was a loser, a

woman with little if any self-esteem, one who was looking for a man to

cling to, love, and obey as a pet dog might. In him she believed she had

found that man. Recognizing her, if dimly, as a victim and one who,

seeing herself as of no account, merited being treated that way, he was

unwilling to spend money on her or take her anywhere she might be seen

as with him. He wasn't proud of her flat chest and skinny legs, he

rweasel face and hungry eyes. Their evening at the Kensington Park

Hotel was an isolated visit. Since then he had simply called around at

her place in Oxford Gardens with a couple of bottles and spent the

evening there.

She regarded him as her boyfriend. He wanted to know if she had told

any of her friends about him and she said she hadn't really got any

friends. There was Kayleigh, of course, but she hadn't mentioned him to

Kayleigh. It might upset her. She hadn't a boyfriend of her own. Danila

had only been in London six months. Before that she'd worked at

Shoshana's Beauty Zenana in Lincoln.

"Madam Shoshana wanted me to work late, but I said I couldn't, I was

seeing my boyfriend. I never said it was you on account of you having

that contract with her. I thought it would look funny."

Mix understood that he could drop her whenever he felt like it. There

would be no repercussions. Meanwhile he didn't mind shagging her, his

body and mind, and hers, desirous and relaxed from the sweetish red

wine. In some ways, she was a better option than Colette GilbertBamber, who thrashed about, wriggling and biting and shouting

instructions. Danila lay passive and yielding, asking nothing, receiving

what she could get and smiling as the long shudder passed through her.

For such a bony girl, she felt surprisingly soft, and when he kissed her,

as he occasionally did, her thin lips seemed to swell and grow warm.

But it wasn't enough to hold him, as he told himself when he returned

to St. Blaise House at midnight, wrapping his darkscarf round his eyes

as he climbed the tiled flight blind, in case Reggie's ghost was in the

passage. He said nothing about the ghost to Danila, but asked her if she

knew Ruth Fuerst had lived just down the road.

"Who?"

It was always a surprise to Mix to discover anyone living in, Notting Hill

not knowing about Christie and his murders. Fifty years ago it may have

been, but it was still fresh in the minds of intelligent people. What could

you expect from a girl as thick as Danila?

"She was the first woman Christie murdered. She lived at number 41."

He told her about Reggie as they lay on her bed after sex. Ruth Fuerst,

Muriel Eady, very probably Beryl Evans and her daughter Geraldine,

several others, and Ethel Christie herself. All of them strangled and

buried in the house or the garden. "If I was him and you were one of

them," he said. "I'd have screwed you the moment you were dead."

"You're kidding me."

"Oh, no. That's what he did. You can go and see where he lived if you

like. It's not far, but it's all changed, not the same."

He didn't offer to show her. "The old woman my flat belongs to, I mean

it's her house, she knew him, they were close, he was going to do an

abortion on her but she ran away."

"You're giving me the creeps, Mix."

He laughed. "I'm going to open the other bottle. Don't get up."

A quarter of an hour before midnight he put his clothes on, a male

Cinderella, preparing to be home at the appointed hour. A real dump, he

thought, looking round the room, not particularly dirty, but an untidy

mess and not a decent piece of furniture to be seen. The curtains looked

as if made from a bedsheet split down the middle. "You can come to my

place next time," he said, carefully considering the implications and

deciding St.Blaise House was safe and a lot more comfortable. It amused

him to think how impressed she would be. "About eight onFriday?"

"Can I really?" She looked at him with shining eyes.

"What a creep, he thought, hasn't got a clue. He didn't really like her.

No, that was wrong. He hated her and he realized why. She reminded

him of his mother. Here, in her, was the same weakness and passivity,

the same inadequacy--look at the mess in that room of hers. Like his

mother, she wasn't good-looking or clever or successful at anything, she

hadn't a scrap of pride and she let any man screw her who wanted to.

The first time he and she went out she'd let him. To be worth having,

women should be hard to get. Not that Colette was, but she was a

nymphomaniac, all the reps said so. His anger with his mother was

transferring itself to Danila. That was the effect she had on a man, he

thought. She made him want to strike her just as his mother did.

He was relieved none of Danila's neighbors were about, no sign of the

Middle Eastern man, and he had to tell himself not to be so anxious as

he emerged into the cold night air, he wasn't Reggie, he wasn't a

murderer fearful of being recognized near the scene of a crime. "What did

it matter if anyone saw him? They'd forget in five minutes, anyway.

Abstractedly, he fingered the cross in his pocket. These days he found he

did this more and more, especially when in contact with the

numberthirteen, passing 13 Oxford Gardens, for instance, or attending to

the thirteenth treadmill at Shoshana's.

More deserving of his attention, he thought next day,
was getting to
know Nerissa. So far he was nowhere. His next move
might be to put
himself on the Shoshana Spa waiting list for membership.
It would be a
simple matter to get Danila to move him up the list,
move him to the top,
even perhaps let him in without his going on it at all.
Then he'd be able
to go there whenever he liked. And it would be good for
him. He had to
admit that he wasn't getting very far with his walking or
cutting down on
junk food. Only half an hour ago, on leaving Colette's,
he'd bought a
Cadbury's fruit and nut bar and a packet of crisps, all of
which had
mysteriously been consumed while he sat in the car
thinking.
He'd ask Danila on Friday. Correction, he'd tell her on
Friday, tell her
what he wanted and to do it. If he went to the spa every
day for a week
he'd be bound to see Nerissa, and once he'd seen her ...
Mix told himself
he was confident in his relations with women and he
understood that it
was because of this confidence that he managed to get
the ones he
wanted. Mostly. If he were strictly honest with himself,
he'd admit that
when it came to one he really wanted a lot, he wasn't so
successful. "Why
was that? He must remember that and once he'd met
Nerissa, go slowly,

carefully. There was no doubt he wanted her more than he ever had

anyone before. For herself, ofcourse, but also for the fame she'd bring him.

All this introspection wearied him and as he drove off to his next call,

his mind wandered into a fantasy of escorting Nerissa to some glittering

function, say the Bafta Awards ceremonywhere they laid red carpet out

on the pavements for the stars towalk on when they stepped out of their

cars. She'd be wearing a wonderful see-through dress and her own

diamonds andhe'd be in a tuxedo, beautifully fitting his new slim figure.

Mixhad never thought much about marriage, beyond knowing hed idn't

want it, or not yet, not till he was approaching forty maybe. But now ... If

he played his cards right, why shouldn't he marry Nerissa? If he was

going to get married one day, whowould suit him better than her and suit

him now?

A letter was decided upon. Though it was many years since she had

written a letter and as long since she had received one, Gwendolen

believed she wrote well. Any piece of prose sheproduced would be a joy to

read and kindle in the heart of the recipient a sensation of the good days

gone by when people could spell, wrote good English without

grammatical errors, and knew how to construct a sentence. A missive she

had been sent by some company purporting to supply her with gas had

contained the sentence, "You will of received our communication."

Of course she had replied in stinging words about the undoubted and

rapid failure of any business unwise enough to employ illiterates, but

had had no answer.

Now she was writing to Stephen Reeves and finding the task difficult.

For the first time in her life she wished she had a television set so that

she could have seen his programs about a country doctor. What a

surprise it would have been to see his name come up on the screen! If

she had known the series was to be transmitted she could have stood

outside the television shop in Westbourne Grove and watched it through

the window. As things were, she couldn't write to him as she would have

liked to, that she had seen his programs and enjoyed them. "Watching

your stories brought to life on the small screen inspired- no, prompted, no,

encouraged?-impelled me to write to you after so many years. Although in

some doubt as to the author's identity, I acquainted myself with your

website which--it would make him see that she had moved with the

times if she mentioned the website. Then Gwendolen remembered that

ofcourse she hadn't seen the series, she hadn't got television, and she must start again.

Hearing from an acquaintance that you had ventured into the realm of

television, I was moved to--the young man in the Internetcafe would

surely count as an acquaintance. She was anxious not to begin by telling

untruths. I was moved to renew oldfriendship--was that too forward?

Most people would say fiftyyears was a long break in any friendship--I

was moved to get intouch with you. She would have to say why. She

would have tosay she wanted to see him. Gwendolen screwed up her fifth

effortand sat disconsolate. It might be best to concentrate withoutpen

and paper and resolve on her words before starting towrite them down.

A serious young man, Darel Jones was handling his move to a

Docklands flat with tender care for his parents. Through school and

university and his postgraduate studies, he had lived at home and now,

at the age of twenty-eight, with a new and much better paid job, it was

time to leave. Knowing he must do so before he was thirty, he had been

careful once he came of age to do his own washing and ironing, eat out

four times a week, visit his girlfriends' places rather than bring them

home for the night, and generally be independent. Thus he trod a fine

line, for his mother would willingly and happily have done everything for

him, welcomed girls, and forced herself not to apply the double standard,

inwardly congratulating him on his choice while condemning them for

their unchastity. He had spent at least two evenings a week with his

parents, taken them out, gone to the cinema with them, been charming

to their friends, and scrupulously thanked his mother for performing

small services for him. Now he was leaving, to live at the other end of

London on his own.

Neither parent had uttered a word of objection but on the eve of his

move, the new furniture installed, his clothes in two suitcases in the hall

waiting to be put into his car, he saw a tear trickle down his mother's

cheek.

"Come on, Mum. Cheer up. Suppose I'd been going to Australia like

your chum Mrs. What's her name's son."

"I didn't say a word," said Sheila Jones defensively. "Tears speak louder."

"What'll you be like when he gets married?" Her husband passed his

handkerchief, a move he had made on an average once a week during

their thirty-year marriage.

"I hope he will. I know I'm going to love his wife."

Darel wasn't so sure. "That's a long way off," he said. "Look, I want you both to say you'll come over to dinner on Saturday. I'll be straight by then."

Sheila began to cheer up. "Tom and Hazel want us all to going next door for a drink this evening to say good-bye. I said we would. Nerissa will be there."

Darel considered, but not for long. "You go," he said. "You can say goodbye for me."

"Oh, we wouldn't go without you. There'd be no point. Besides, we'd miss our last few precious hours with you."

If she hadn't said that model would be there he might have agreed.

Nerissa Nash--why couldn't she have kept her father's interesting

surname?--was very beautiful, any man would admit that, and according

to his father, a nice girl. But Darel was wary of the whole celebrity world.

He knew of it only from what he read in the newspapers. Since his

preferred reading was usually the Financial Times, this wasn't much of a

guide, but certain emotive words suggestive of that world aroused his

distaste: club, fashion, star, public appearance, designer, and of course

"celebrity" itself were among them. Someone belonging in that so-called

elite must be empty-headed, ignorant, tasteless, and shallow. Such

people were heading for empty, unhappy lives, failed relationships, dysfunctional families, alienated children, and a desperate unwillingness to grow old.

What a prig you are, he often told himself, always resolving to be less

ensorious. The fact remained that he had no wish to extend his

acquaintance with Nerissa Nash beyond replying "Good evening" to her

"Hi" and raising his hand in a modified wave if he saw her at a distance.

Chapter 9

It wasn't until the doorbell rang that Mix remembered Danila was coming

round. He had forgotten to buy any cheap wine and now he'd have to give

her that rather nice Merlot he'd bought for his own private consumption

on Sunday night. Spending the evening at home, as he thought alone, he

had been enthralled in Chapter 3 of Christie's Victims, reading of

Muriel Bady, a 31-year-old woman, living in Putney and employed at the

Ultra Radio Works in Park Royal. On leaving the police for no known

reason, Christie had also gone to work there. He and she became friends,

insofar as Christie was capable of friendship, and on several occasions

she and her fiancé and Christie with Mrs. Christie all went out together.

Muriel Bady suffered from chronic rhinitis and Christie claimed to be able

to cure her with the aid of an inhalation device of his own invention. When

his wife had gone away, once more to have a holiday with her brother in

Sheffield, he invited Muriel around, gave her a cup of tea and showed her

what he said was the device. However, though it contained Friar's

Balsam, it also, unbeknown to Muriel, admitted a tube attached at the

other end to a gas outlet ...

It had been at this point that Mix was summoned to answer the door.

Old Chawcer had seen no need for an entry phone or even a separate

doorbell for the top flat, so on the rare occasions when someone called on

him, he had to go all the way down the fifty-two stairs and come all the

way up again. Old Chawcer never answered the door unless she was

expecting a guest, an even less usual event in the evenings, so he was

prettysure she wouldn't let Danila in. For, by the time he had set foot on

the top tread of the tiled staircase, he had remembered who this caller

must be.

The bell rang twice more before he got there. He needn't have worried

about the wine because she had brought two bottles with her, one of

Riesling and one of gin. This ought to have pleased him but it didn't. In

his view, women shouldn't contribute to the evening's entertainment, no

self-respecting woman would, she'd expect the man to pay. Danila's mass

of dark hair was bigger and wilder than ever--ridiculous, he thought, it

caused her little pinched face to look tiny. Her next move made matters

even worse. Having set the bottles down on the hall table, she threw her

arms round Mix's neck and kissed him.

"I'm ever so glad to see you. I've been looking forward to this."

He said nothing but led her up the stairs. Outside Miss Chawcer's

bedroom sat Otto, engaged in an all-over wash.

"Oh, what a sweet kitty!" Danila's shriek made Otto start to his feet and

arch his back. "Is she yours? Isn't she a darling!" She made the mistake

of putting out a hand toward Otto's head. He drew back, hissed and

glared at her before running upstairs. "Oh, I frightened her!"

"Come on," said Mix.

On the landing outside his front door she asked why it was so dark and

said the stained glass window gave her the creeps, but his anger was

softened to a mild irritation by her admiration of his flat. She walked

round his living room, passing the portrait of Nerissa Nash with just a

glance at it and then at him, but adoring everything else. Oh, the window

blinds! Oh, the cushions, the furniture, the ornaments, the lamp shades!

The amazing TN! That lovely gray marble statue of a girl.
Who was she?

"Some goddess. Psyche, they called her, when I bought her," he said. He

poured them each a stiff gin with tonic from his fridge and ice from the

freezer. He hadn't a lemon. "You like the apartment, then?"

"It's great. What you must think of my grotty place!"

"I've taken a lot of trouble to get it this way."

"I'm sure. Why d'you read about awful murders when you've got a lovely

place like this?" She had picked up his book, left face-downwards on the

arm of the gray silk sofa. "Yuck, it's horrible. 'She was unconscious and

while he strangled her he raped her,' " she read aloud.

"Give that to me." Mix snatched the book from her. "Now you've lost my place."

"I'm sorry. It was just that I ... "

"All right, never mind. Bring your drink in the bedroom."

They would have to go through all that shrieking and gasping stuff all

over again when she saw the furniture and the pictures. Might as well get

it over with so that they could get down to what was the reason for her

coming at all. He refilled his glass while she wandered around the

bedroom in the same sort of ecstasy as she'd shown in the living room. He

sipped his drink. It was that good Bombay gin in the blue bottle she'd

brought, he had to grant her that. He strolled back, pretending

astonishment to see her dressed as she had been two minutes before.

"I reckoned you'd be starkers by now."

"Mix." She came up to him. "Mix, do we always have to start doing it the

minute I come? Can't we talk for a bit?"

He was surprised. She was showing initiative for the first time, as if she

had some sort of right to an opinion on the order of events. He could see

what it was. In her eyes he was her boyfriend now and she was starting

to take him for granted. Soon she'd be telling him what to do, not asking

him.

"Talk about what?" he said.

"I don't know. Things. You getting the furniture for thisplace, your job,

mine, your lovely cat."

"It's not my fucking cat!" he almost yelled.

"There's no need to shout."

She took her clothes off but not the way Mix would have preferred, not

like a stripper giving a titillating performance. Danila undressed as she

would when she was alone, placing her outer garments over the back of a

chair, turning her back onhim to take off thong and tights. How he hated

tights. And didn't she know wearing a G-string with them was a joke?

She, left her bra till last, ashamed of her tiny breasts. He thought, I won't

see her again, I'll find some other way of getting to know Nerissa.

She went to the bed but he stopped her. "Wait a minute." He wasn't

going to do it on top of his ivory satin quilt; he lifted it off and folded it.

"All right," he said.

The look she gave him was subservient but with something in it too of

bewilderment. He took off his shoes and trousers but kept his shirt on

and his socks. A man didn't have to strip off, that was the woman's role.

A simmering anger against her, a cold rage he couldn't quite account for,

stopped him taking any trouble and what happened could have been

called rape, only she didn't resist. He rolled away from her to finish his

drink.

Five minutes later she was walking round the flat again. He heard her

say, "Why d'you have her up there?"

There was no doubt as to what she meant. But "You mean Nerissa

Nash?" he said, to make assurance absolutely sure.

"You fancy her or something?"

Mix got up. Somewhere in him was a prudish streak, legacy perhaps of

a childhood among the Seventh Day Adventists. Of course his

disapproval rather depended on who it was. Somehow it was all right

when it was Colette and it would be more than all right—fantastic--if it

had been Nerissa, but in Danila it seemed to smack of defiance, of taking

things and him for granted, and of asserting herself. A woman like her

knew very well you don't walk about nude the way she was doing in a

man's flat unless you have a good reason to call him yours and have a

proprietary interest in his place. He took his dressing gown out of the

wardrobe and put it round her.

She received it with an ill grace. Like his mother, she sulked when you

told her off. Standing in front of the portrait, she pointed to it, actually

placing one finger on the glass. "She's got practically nothing on. I

suppose that's all right."

Careless of the pain his words might cause, he said, "She's beautiful."

Danila said nothing but continued to stare and to keep her finger where

she had placed it. Never very tall, she seemed to shrink a little and goose

bumps came up on her forearms, uncovered by the dressing-gown

sleeves. A great resentment filled him. By her silence and her palpable

hurt, she had made him feel awkward.

"D'you want another drink?" he muttered.

"Not just yet."

He opened the wine bottle. If he kept on at the gin he'd not be able to do

it again, and the only point in her being here was to manage it two or

three times. With Nerissa, he thought, he'd be inexhaustible. He

remembered that there was another point to Danila's visit. He had to ask

her about the membership list. Tell her, he corrected himself, a brimming glass of wine in his hand.

"Look, getting to be a member of the spa, I thought ... "

Slowly, she turned round and he saw the marks on her face. She took

no notice of what he had begun to say. "I've seen her," she said.

"Seen who?"

"Her. Nerissa Nash."

This wasn't at all the way he wanted things to go. If he told her what he

expected her to do about the list now, at this moment, she'd understand

at once he only aimed to join the spa in order to meet Nerissa. His

request would have to be postponed again.

He chose his words carefully. "Where did you see her, then? In a photo, you mean."

"No, for real. She goes to Madam Shoshana for a reading of the stones."

"With no idea what she was talking about, he said as if he'd be

astonished by the answer yes, "She's not a member of the spa, is she?"

"Nerissa? Oh, no. "With that figure, she must go to a gym some where.

Somewhere in the West End, I reckon, Mayfair. I'd been to Madam

Shoshana for my reading--I get a discount--and I met her coming up the

stairs. A Wednesday it was, sometime in July. Ever so nice she was, said

hi and it was a lovely day, made you glad to be alive."

He was stunned. He couldn't speak. He'd wasted weeks going to that

place, messed about uselessly with machines that didn't need attention,

used up his evenings with this dog of a woman, spent his hard-earned

money on her. Her cunningly back-combed and tangled hair had done

what it always did during their scuffles, fallen in lank rats' tails. His rage

at the shock of discovering Nerissa's true purpose in visiting the spa

building had come to boiling point, and it was directed at this girl, this

stupid ignorant ugly girl with her rice--white skin and her bony chest.

Nerissa didn't even belong to Shoshana's Spa. She'd gone there to see a

fortune-teller and no doubt it was a one-off visit.

Quite unaware of his anger, Danila said, "Mind you, close to, she's not

the supermodel she is in your pic. Her skin's a bit coarse--well, it being

so dark, it would be. I reckon whoever took that photo got busy

airbrushing ... "

He didn't hear the end of the sentence. Hatred filled him, joining his

anger. That she dared to criticize the most beautiful woman in the world!

The insult grated like something scraping at his brain. He reached for

some object, anything, to infuse with his rage. His hand closed round the

marble Psyche and once more he seemed to hear Javy accusing him of

the attack on Shannon, his mother standing by.

Who was it he was about to destroy with this weapon? Javy? His

mother? This cringing girl?

"What are you doing?"

She never spoke again, only screamed and made gurgling sounds as he

struck her repeatedly about her head with the Psyche. He'd thought

blood flowed gently but hers sprayed at him in scarlet fountains. Her

eyes remained fixed on his in horror and amazement. He aimed a final

blow at her forehead to close those staring eyes.

She fell to the floor, sliding down the portrait to collapse on her back.

He dropped the Psyche onto the polished boards. It seemed to make an

enormous noise as it fell so that he expected crowds alerted by it to come

rushing into the room. But there was no one, of course there was no one.

Instead absolute quiet, the silence of a vast desert or an empty house by

the sea, waves breaking softly on the shore. The Psyche rolled a little,

this way and that way, and was still. The only movement was the slow

trickling of her blood down the glass.

Chapter 10

He went slowly to the window, opened the slats instead of raising the

blind, and looked down. Lights in the backs of houses in the street

behind lit the gardens. There was no one about. Nothing stirred, no

human being, no cat, no bird. A pale crescent moon had risen in a sky

streaked with cloud. Behind his front door he listened. Out there too all

was still and silent.

"No one knows anything about it," he said aloud. "They don't know

what's happened, no one knows but me." And then, as if someone had

accused him and he was defending himself, "I didn't mean to do it, but

she asked for it. It just happened."

His instinct was to shut himself in the bedroom, where he couldn't see

what he had done, and hide himself. For sometime, though with the door

still open, he sat on the bed with his head in his hands. The phone

ringing frightened him more than anything ever had. He gave a galvanic

start so violent that he feared he might have broken a bone. I was wrong

and people do know. Police, he thought, someone's phoned them.

They heard her scream and me drop the statue. The ringing stopped but

started again after a few seconds. This time he had to answer it and he

did so in a hoarse, quavering voice.

"You sound as if you've got the dreaded flu too," said Ed. "I'm okay."

"Yeah. Well, good. I'm not. I think I've got a virus, so could you do two of

my calls tomorrow? They're the important ones." Ed named the clients

and gave their phone numbers. Or Mix supposed that's what he was

doing. He couldn't take it in. "I realize it's Saturday but they won't take

long, it's more they want reassuring."

"Okay. Anything you say."

"That's brilliant. And, Mix, me and Steph are getting engaged

Wednesday. I've got to be back to normal for that. Drinks on me in the

old Sun at eight-thirty, so be there."

Mix put the phone down. He went slowly back to the livingroom, feeling

his way with his eyes shut. The idea came to him before he opened them

that he might have dreamt it all, it was some hideous nightmare. There

would be nothing on the floor. She had gone home. Blindly he fumbled

his way into an armchair, sat there, facing straight ahead, and the first

thing he saw when he opened his eyes was the blood on the glass. It was

drying by now. Some of the thin streams had never reached the floor but

dried into blackish-crimson lines and globules. What he thought was a

sigh became a sob, and a long shudder passed through him.

Had Reggie felt like this? Or was he made of stronger, sterner stuff?

That wasn't something Mix wanted to admit to. The girl had asked for it-which seemed to be true of some of Reggie's victims. He knew he must do

something. He couldn't just leave her here. If it took him all night, he

must clean up and decide what to do about the thing on the floor. Her

eyes, which he had tried to close, remained open under the wound in her

forehead, looking up at him. He took a gray linen napkin out of a drawer

and laid it over her face. After that it was better.

He was still wearing nothing but his underpants. Some spots of blood

had got on them. He took them off, threw them on the floor and put on

jeans and a black sweatshirt. She had fallen beyond the edge of the

carpet, so that most of the blood was on the pale polished wood

surround, on the walls, and on the glass of the portrait. A good thing he

had decided to splash out and have it glazed. That he could think like

this comforted him. He was recovering. The first thing must be to wrap

the body and move it. What was he going to do next? Do with it, he

meant. Take it somewhere in the boot of the car, a park or a building

site, and dump it? When they found it they wouldn't know he'd done it.

No one knew they'd spent any time together.

He found a sheet that would do. When he came to St. Blaise House he'd

bought all his bed linen new but he had some left from Tufnell Park

days. His tastes had changed from when he was buying red sheets! Still,

red was good for this purpose, it wouldn't show blood.
Keeping his eyes
averted as best he could, he rolled the body up in the
sheet. She felt very
light and fragile and he wondered if she'd been anorexic.
Maybe. He knew
very little about her, he hadn't been interested. When
he'd dragged the
bundle out into his narrow hall, he fetched a bucket and
detergent and
cloths from the kitchen and set about cleaning up. He
began with the
portrait and when it was spotless and gleaming once
again, he felt
enormously better. His fear had been that some of the
blood--there had
been so much--might have got inside the glass and the
frame onto
Nerissa's photograph, but not a drop had. It occurred to
him that the
Psyche looked a lot like Nerissa, she might have been the
model for it. He
washed the figurine in the kitchen sink, under the
running tap, first hot
water, then cold, the blood sliding off its head and
breasts, red water,
then pink, then clear.
Just the edge of the carpet was stained. He scrubbed and
rinsed and
scrubbed and dried and he thought it was all out. Getting
it off the
polished boards wasn't a problem, they were heavily
lacquered and stains
slid off. If only the wall behind had been one of the dark
green ones. He'd

probably have to repaint it; he'd still got a two-liter tin of the shade called

Cumulus and he'd do it on Sunday.

By the time he'd finished, the fourth bucketful of reddened water down

the sink and the cloths in the washing machine, he sat down with a stiff

Bombay gin. It tasted wonderful, as if he hadn't had a drink for months.

One thing was for sure: the body couldn't stay here. And if he tried to put

it in Holland Park, for instance, he couldn't do it without someone

seeing. The trouble was, the first and only time he and she went

outtogether they might have been seen by any number of people in KPH.

She said she'd told no one but how could he believe her? She'd admitted

telling Madam Shoshana she had a boyfriend even if she hadn't said his

name. Then there was the barmaid at KPH. She might remember. Miss

Chawcer might not have answered the doorbell that evening, but she'd

remember it had rung if anyone asked. She might even have seen Danila

through the window. No, he couldn't just dump the body.

His eye fell on Christie's Victims she or he had dropped onto the coffee

table. Reggie, he thought, had faced the same difficulty. He'd been seen

about with Ruth Fuerst, he'd eaten in the Ultra Works canteen with

Muriel Eady and been out with her and her boyfriend. He dared not risk

leaving their bodies to be found in case he was connected with their

deaths. Something safer yet bolder had to be done. Mix referred to the

book. Even though the neighbors saw what he was doing, even though

they chatted to him and he to them, he had managed to dig a pit for

Fuerst in his garden and put the body into it after dark. Muriel Eady he

also buried a little way from the first grave.

Mix came upon a photograph of the garden in the next pages of

illustrations. A white ring marked the spot where the leg bone had been

found, and a cross marked Muriel Eady's grave. If the marks hadn't been

made there was nothing to show where the burial had been. Before

interment, all the bodies of the women he had killed had been

temporarily stowed under the floorboards or in the washhouse. Mix

wondered if either would be available to him--was there a washhouse

here? Certainly there was a cellar--but it might be possible, though

difficult, to get into the garden. However he lived in a house

immeasurably larger than Reggie's half-house; well, half of a small

terraced cottage, really.

He closed the book, put his keys into his pocket, and let himself out of

his front door, noticing on his way out that it was eleven-thirty. The old

bat had amazing hearing for her age, but she would be asleep two floors

below. Mix stood on the top landing, listening.

He turned left and set off along the passage. Of course there was a

possibility he would see the ghost but he was making resolute efforts not

to accept that there was a ghost. He had imagined it. The cat had opened

that door itself. To be on the safeside, he closed his hand over the cross

in his jeans pocket. The light he had switched on quickly went out as it

always did, but he had brought a flashlight with him. In the dark, he

opened the first door on his left and found himself inside a room that

must have been adjacent to his own living room. The gleam from the

flashlight was rather feeble but because the window in here was

uncurtained, it wasn't dark but dimly lit from still lighted backs of houses

and by the faint moonlight.

Just the same, he would have liked more. He couldn't see a switch on

any of the walls and when he looked where the hanging cable and lampholder should have been, there hung only a strange object with two metal

strings suspended from it. If anything could have distracted him from the

matter in hand, this did. He directed the torch beam upward. It took him

a few moments to realize that what he was looking at was a gas mantle.

He had once seen a television program about the electrification of London

replacing gas in the twenties and thirties. There were houses in Portland

Road, not far from here, still lit by gas in the sixties.

The room contained a bedstead and a tall chest of drawers with a

mirror on top. Anyone wanting to look in that mirror would have had to

be nearly seven feet tall to reach it, Mix calculated. A stack of

bookshelves, sagging under the weight of heavy tomes stuffed beside and

on top of each other, nearly filled one wall. He went back into the

passage and into the room opposite where the yellow light from St. Blaise

Avenue flowed in brightly, showing him that here too the system had

never been replaced by electricity.

It made him feel as if he had strayed back in time, back beyond Reggie

and all his works, back behind modern technology and everything that

made life easy. He shuddered. Suppose he really had gone back in time

and found it impossible to return? Suppose it was a dream, all of it was a

dream, the killing, the blood, the gas, and the darkness? But he had

been through that one before and he knew it wasn't.

The air felt close. It had been another hot day. On this whole top floor

only the windows in his own flat were ever opened. The closeness was

dusty and although no fresh air came in, flies lived up here in swarms,
crawling on the windowglass in the dark. He turned around, passed his
own front door, and set off along the right-hand passage. Electric light
was available in the first room on the right but there was no bulb in the
fitment. Here the gleam of street lamps outside had curtains to penetrate.
He pulled them back, too roughly, for fragments of cloth and dust fell off
onto the sill. This room was partly furnished with an iron bedstead, a
deckchair with no seat, a dressing table and an upright chair with a
broken leg propped up on a jamjar. The deckchair again reminded him of
Reggie. At least one of his later victims, Kathleen Maloney, he had put in
a deckchair with a makeshift seat of woven string, in order to administer
gas to her in his kitchen.
A folded newspaper lay on the floor. This copy of the Sun would be ages
old, Mix thought, dropped there in the fifties probably. But when he
picked it up and, in the yellow light, made out the date on it, he saw it
was only from the previous October. More upsetting was the date, the
thirteenth. The old bat must have been up here and left her paper
behind. Who would have thought she'd read the Sun? She'd left this one

with that date on it behind to frighten him, he thought. That must be it.

The room opposite, on the other side of the wall where Nerissa's picture

hung and Danila had died, also had electricity, also lacked a lightbulb

and was just as stuffy. It was empty but for a bedstead without a

mattress. He pulled back the thin curtains. Outside, he could just make

out what he could only glimpse from his own windows, gables and annex

roofs of nextdoor, the pointed trees and squat bushes in pots the old

man kept on the roof of a carport, a great chimney with a dozen flues

spanning an expanse of tiles, the broken glass top of a derelict

conservatory. All this would make access to the next room along easy, he

thought. Anyone could climb up and get in. But when he tried the door, it

was locked and no key was visible as he squatted down and tried to look

through the keyhole. At least Chawcer had locked the door. She had

taken that much precaution against burglars, though a flimsy one. A

wonder the atmosphere didn't choke her.

One last room remained. It was quite empty, even to the extent of being

stripped of what it might once have contained. There was a curtain rail

but no curtains. Some sort of carpet there had been nailed, and in places

glued, to the floor but it had been torn up, leaving nail holes and sticky-looking patches. She came up here sometimes, he could tell that, but not

into the gas-lit rooms. The first one he had gone into, the room which

had surprised him because of the means by which it had been lit, that

would be Danila's resting place.

Christie had put Ruth Fuerst's body under the floorboards. Mix

remembered how, years ago, when he was in his teens, one of the water

pipes had frozen in the house where he lived with his mother in

Coventry. She said she had a bad back and couldn't do anything, it was

one of the times Javy had left her--he always came back again till the

last time--so he went up into the icy-cold bathroom and, with her telling

him how to do it, took up three of the floorboards. He'd had to prise up

the tiles first. This would be much easier, nothing but the boards and

these very old, to lift.

The only tools he had now were those he used in the maintenance of

exercise machines. He let himself into his own flat, almost stumbling

over the body he had laid in the little hallway, and searched through the

bag that held his toolkit with fingers damp with sweat. Spanners, a

hammer, screwdrivers ... The biggest spanner would have to do and, if

necessary, he'd ruin the screwdriver by using it to prise up the boards.

He went back on to the landing and, leaving his door open, stood

listening to the house. It seemed to him that, though it was always quiet,

this silence was uncanny. Of course, at half past midnight, the old bat

had been asleep for hours, but where was the cat? It nearly always spent

its nights somewhere on the staircase. And why hadn't Reggie appeared?

Because he'd protected himself with the cross or because he'd imagined

it, he told himself sternly. But that maddening imagination was still

functioning, creating now the figure in its shiny glasses standing beside

him, watching what he did, until he shut his eyes against it. He plunged

back into the lighted flat, breathing fast. Another drink. The door closing

him inside, he poured his biggest gin of the night and, sitting on the floor

beside the body, drank it down neat and ice-less. It filled him with fire

and when he got to his feet, set him staggering.

But after another reconnaissance and another listening at the top of the

stairs, he dragged the body out. He pulled his redwrapped bundle along

the passage and into the first room on the left. Quietly he closed the door

and switched on his flashlight. Someone had said it was never dark in

London and more light came in--thank God for the guinea fowl man who

seemed to keep lights on until the small hours--~ show him the pins that

held the floorboards in place. "With the aid of the screwdriver and the flat

shaft of the spanner, they came up quite easily. Beneath was a space

between the joists, as far as he could see about a foot deep, though

intersected with cables and old lead pipes. How dust could get in there

was a mystery but when he brought his hands out they were furred with

thick gray powder.

The beam of light wakened the flies and they began dancing round it.

He had intended to take a last look at the body before he put it into the

recess he had made but now he had forgotten why and he couldn't bring

himself to unwrap that face and again see that wound. The featherlight

body slid into the gap he had made with scarcely a sound. Its grave

might have been measured to fit it so well. Replacing the boards took

only a moment. A fly crawled across his hand and he swatted at it with

disproportionate fury. He dared not hammer the pins in, not at this hour.

He'd do it in the morning when she or anyone would expect him to be

banging a bit, putting up a picture, say.

A shivery sensation made him feel that Reggie was behind him,

watching his movements, perhaps bending close over his back, and this

time he was afraid, rigid with fear. He liked Reggie, admired him really

and felt sorry for him meeting such a dreadful fate, but he was terrified

too. You were when the person you admired was the dead come back. If

he turned now and saw Reggie, he would die of fright, his heart wouldn't

be strong enough to stand the terror. Mix shut his eyes and rocked back

and forth on his haunches, whimpering softly. If he had felt a hand on

his shoulder, then too he would have died of fear; if the thing had

breathed and its breathing been heard, his heart would have cracked

and split.

He grasped the cross. There was nothing there. Of course not, there

never had been. All the sounds, the single sighting, the opening door,

everything was an illusion brought about by the horror-film setting, the

nasty creepiness of this house. Just getting back into his flat relieved

him enormously. The silence now was welcome, the proper condition of

this place at this hour. And the bodily sensations he had were a sour

taste in his mouth, nausea rising and the start of a drumming in his

head. He knew how unwise it would be to drink anything more but he

did, filling the same glass that had held gin with the sweet cheap Riesling she had brought. As it hit him, he stumbled into the bedroom where her clothes lay as she had placed them, irritating him by arranging them neatly over a chair.

Reggie had wrapped Ruth Fuerst's body in her own coat and buried the

rest of her clothes with her. He should have done the same. Collapsing

onto the bed, noticing through glaze deyes that it was twenty to two, he

knew he couldn't go back in there tonight, he couldn't take those boards

up again, replace them again. In the morning he would take the clothes

out of the house in a carrier bag and put them in a litter bin, or several

litterbins. No, a better idea. He'd put them in one of the bins where the

proceeds from their sale went to sufferers from cerebral palsy or some

such thing.

And now he would sleep ...

Chapter 11

Today was the anniversary of the first time he had come into the drawing

room to have tea with her. Half a century ago. She saw that she had

made a ring in red round that date on the Beautiful Britain calendar that

hung on the kitchen wall on top of last year's kitten calendar and the

tropical flowers one from the year before. Gwendolen had kept all the

calendars for every year back to 1945. They piled up on the kitchen

hook and when there was room for no more, the bottom ones were all

stuffed away in drawers somewhere. Somewhere. Among books or old

clothes or on top of things or under things. The only ones whose

whereabouts she was positive about were those from 1949 and 1953.

The 1953 calendar she had found and now kept in the drawing room for

obvious reasons. It recorded all the dates on which she had had tea with

Stephen Reeves. She had come upon it by chance last year while looking

for the notice which had come from some government department telling

her about a £200 fuel payment due to be made to pensioners. And there,

alongside it, was the Canaletto Venice calendar. Just seeing it again

made her heart flutter. Of course she had never forgotten a single one of

their times alone together but seeing it recorded--"Dr. Reeves to tea"--somehow confirmed it, made it real, as if she might otherwise have

dreamt it. Under the heading of a Wednesday in February she had

written, in a rare comment, "Sadly, no Bertha or any successor to bring our tea."

Sheltered and quiet as Gwendolen's life had been, perhaps as unruffled

as a life can be, it had included a very few peaks of excitement. All of

these she thought about from time to time but none with such wonder as

her visit to Christie's house. It too was more than fifty years ago now and

she had been not much over thirty. The maid who carried up the hot

water and perhaps even emptied the chamber pots had been with

them for two years. She was seventeen and her name was Bertha. What

else she was called Gwendolen couldn't remember, if she had ever known.

The professor never noticed anything about people and Mrs. Chawcer

was too wrapped up in working for the Holy Catholic Apostolics to have

time for a servant's troubles, but Gwendolen observed the change in the

girl's figure. She was with her more than the other occupants of the

house.

"You're beginning to get stout, Bertha," she said, using a favorite word

applied to others in the vocabulary of the skeletal Chawcers. Gwendolen

was too innocent and ignorant to suspect the truth, and when Bertha

confessed it she was deeply shocked.

"But you can't be expecting, Bertha. You're only seventeen and you

can't have ... " Gwendolen couldn't bring herself to go on.

"As far as that goes, miss, I could have ever since I was eleven, but I

never did and now I am. You won't tell the missus or your dad, will you?"

It was an easy promise for Gwendolen to make. She would have died

before she mentioned such things to the professor. As for her mother,

she couldn't forget how once, when she whispered to Mrs. Chawcer, with

much shame and diffidence, of an old man who had exposed himself to

her, she had been told never to utter such words again and to wash her

mouth

out with soap.

"What will you do with the baby?"

"There won't be a baby, miss. I've got the name and address of someone

who'll get rid of it for me."

Gwendolen was not so much in deep waters as in an unknown country

peopled with men and women who did forbidden things and spoke a

language of words that should never be uttered, a land of mystery and

discomfort and ugliness and danger. She wished very much that she

hadn't asked Bertha why she was gaining weight. It never occurred to

her to be sorry for this young girl who worked ten hours a day for them

and was paid very little for performing tasks their own class would

shudder to think of. It never entered her mind to put herself in Bertha's

shoes and imagine the disgrace which would come to an unmarried

mother or the horror of watching herself grow so large that further

deception was impossible. She was curious rather against her will, but

afraid and anxious to be,uninvolved.

"You'll be all right then," she said brightly.

"Miss, can I ask you something?"

"I expect so," said Gwendolen with a smile.

"When I go to him, would you come with me?"

Gwendolen thought this an impertinence. She had been brought up to

expect deference from servants and indeed everyone from a "lower class."

But her shyness and her fear of the different and of things she hadn't

experienced wasn't absolute. Curiosity was a novelty for her but she felt

it worm its way into her mind and wait there, trembling. She might see a

little more of this new country which had unprecedentedly opened its

borders to her. Instead of replying to Bertha with a sharp, "Do you know

whom you're speaking to?" she said, quite meekly but with an increased

beating of the heart, "Yes, if you like."

The street was squalid, with the old chimney of an iron foundry at the

far end of it, the Metropolitan Railway from Ladbroke Grove to Latimer

Road running nearby and above ground. The man they had come to see

lived at number 10. It smelled and it was dirty. The kitchen was

furnished with two deckchairs. Christie might have been in his forties or

past fifty,it was hard to tell. He was a tallish but slight man with a

beakyface and thick glasses and he seemed dismayed to see Gwendolen.

Later on she understood why. Of course she did. He wanted no one else

to know Bertha had been there. She refused to sit down. Bertha took one

of the chairs and Christie the other. Perhaps she had antagonized him or

perhaps he only ever dealt with his clients tete-a-tete, but he immediately

said he would want to see Bertha alone. For chaperonage, his wife would

be present. Gwendolen never saw the wife nor heard anything of her. All

they would do now, Christie said, was make an appointment for the

examination and the "treatment," but Miss Chawcer must go. Everything

that passed between himself and his patient must be confidential.

"I won't be long, miss," Bertha said. "If you'd wait for me at the end of

the street, I won't be a minute."

Another impertinence, but Gwendolen did wait. Various passersby

stared at her with her carefully made-up face, hair permed into sausage

curls and her full-skirted, tight-fitting blue dress. One man whistled at

her and Gwendolen's discomfort showed in her darkly flushed cheeks.

Eventually Bertha came. "I won't be a minute" was true. She had been at

least ten. The appointment was for Bertha's next day off, a week ahead.

"I'm not to tell anyone, miss, and you mustn't."

But Christie had frightened her. Although Mrs. Christie wasn't there, he

had done some strange intimate things, asked her to open her mouth so

that he could look down her throat with a mirror on the end of a rod, and

asked her to lift her skirt up to mid-thigh level.

"I've got to go back, miss, haven't I? I can't have a baby, not unless I'm married."

Gwendolen felt she ought to have asked about the father of the child,

who he was and where he was, did he know about the baby and was

there a chance of his marrying Bertha if he did. It was too embarrassing,

it was too sordid. At home, in the quiet and civilized atmosphere of St.

Blaise House, seated comfortably among cushions on the sofa, she was

reading Proust, and had reached Volume 7. No one in Proust ever had

babies. She retired into her cocooned world.

Bertha never went back to Christie. She was too frightened. By the time

Gwendolen read about his murders in the papers, the young women who

came to his house for abortions or cures for catarrh, his wife, perhaps

too the woman and baby upstairs, it was 1953 and Bertha long gone.

She left before the child was born, and someone married her, though

whether it was the father Gwendolen never knew. The whole thing

was horribly sordid. But she never forgot her visit to Rillington Place and

how Bertha too might so easily have been one of those women immured

in cupboards or buried in the garden.

Bertha--she hadn't thought of her for years. The visit to Christie's house

must have been three or four years before his trial and execution. It

wasn't worth wasting time looking for the 1949 calendar but what else

had she to do with her time? Read, of course. She had long finished

Middlemarch, reread Carlyle's French Revolution and completed some of

the works of Arnold Bennett, though she considered them too light to

spend much time on. Today she would start on Thomas Mann. She had

never read him, a dreadful omission, though they had all his works

somewhere in the many bookcases.

The British Fungi calendar for 1949--what a ridiculous subject!--she

found after searching for an hour, in a room on the top floor, next door to

Mr. Cellini's flat. In the night gone by, more the hour or so before dawn,

she had been awakened by a scream and a thud she thought came from

there but she was probably mistaken. This was one of the rooms which

the professor had insisted it wasn't necessary to have wired for

electricity. Gwendolen had been a child at the time but she remembered

quite clearly the wiring of the lower floors, the men taking up floorboards

and making great caves in the plaster of walls. This morning was bright

and hot, light flooding in from the window on which the curtains had

fallen into rags sometime in the thirties and never been replaced. It was

several years since she had been up here, she couldn't remember when

had been the last time.

The bookcase, a store place for ancient, never very readable books there

was no room for downstairs, novels by Sabine Baring-Gould and R. D.

Blackmore among bound numbers of Victorian journals, The Complete

Works of Samuel Richardson, and Darwin's The Origin of Species. No

Thomas Mann. Perhaps she would reread Darwin instead. She looked in

the drawers underneath the shelves. Blunt pencils and elastic bands and

receipted bills filled them, along with pieces of broken china in labeled

bags someone must have intended to repair but never had. The big chest

of drawers was her last hope. Taking the few steps that would bring her

to it, she tripped and would have fallen but for grabbing hold of the top

of the chest. One of the floorboards stuck out perhaps half an inch above

the rest.

Bending over as best she could, she peered at the floor. He rreading

glasses were in one pocket of her cardigan and the magnifying glass in

the other. She made use of them. The boards appeared not to be nailed

down but they must be and the glasses weren't strong enough for her to

see. How odd. Perhaps it was the damp making one of them protrude.

There was a lot of it in this old house, rising damp and whatever the

other kind was. With some difficulty, she got down on her knees, her

joints cracking, and felt the surface of the protruding board. Quite dry.

Odd, she thought. And all those little holes were odd too, dozens of them

peppering the woodwork. But perhaps it was always like that and she

had never noticed. On her feet again, she began to examine the chest.

The fungicalendar came to light in the second drawer she looked

through, and with it was one of those letters from a property developer,

offering her huge sums to sell her house, this one dated 1998. "Why on

earth had she put it there five years before? She couldn't remember but

she was sure the floorboard hadn't been that way then.

The calendar she took over to the window, the better to read her own

handwriting. There it was, for 16 June, a Thursday. "Accompanied B. to

house in Rillington Place." She recalled writing that but not the entry for

the following day, "Think I may have flu but new doctor says no, only a

cold." The rapid beating of her heart began again and she felt the need to

put her hand over her ribs as if to hold it still. That was the first time she

had met him. She had gone to the Ladbroke Grove surgery, waited in the

waiting room for old Dr. Smyth, but the man who opened the door and

smiled, ushering her in, was Stephen Reeves.

Gwendolen let the hand holding the calendar fall down to the other side, and

going back in time to her first sight of him in her youth and his, gazed

almost unseeing out of the window. Otto lay sleeping on the wall, the

crinolined birds pattered about in their wilderness as their owner in a

white turban came down the path with corn to feed them. She saw

Stephen, his bright smiling eyes, his dark hair, heard him say, "Not

many folks waiting this morning. And what can I do for you?"

The weekend would have passed with Danila's disappearance going

unnoticed but for Kayleigh Rivers waking up with a bad cold. Danila had

worked at Shoshana's Spa every weekday from 8 A.M. till 4 P.M. and

Kayleigh worked there on Saturdays and Sunday mornings and every

evening from four till eight. Kayleigh tried calling Danila on her mobile to

ask her if she'd do her weekend and when she got no reply, called Madam

Shoshana.

"She's still asleep, isn't she?" Shoshana said. "Like I was. She's got her

mobile switched off. Look at the time."

She waited till eight. The spa didn't open till nine on Saturdays."When

she rang Danila's mobile all she got was dead silence. It might be early,

but it was too late to get a temp. She paid her girls-- illegally-ten pounds

a week below the minimum wage but Kayleigh needn't think she was

paying her for pretending to be ill. As for Danila ... Shoshana understood

she was going to have to do it herself and she heaved herself unwillingly

out of bed. In spite of owning and running a fashionable gym and beauty

clinic with manicurist and pedicurist, waxing and electrolysis studio,

aromatherapist and salt baths unit, Shoshana paid no personal attention

to herself or any of these things and didn't wash much. "When you got

older you didn't need more than a once-weekly bath and an occasional

dip for hands, face, and feet. Patchouli, cedarwood, cardamom, and

nutmeg covered up any possible odors.

She visited the spa itself as little as possible. It interested her only

insofar as it made money. Exercise and beauty treatments, keeping fit

and retaining youth, bored her and when she sat downstairs at the

receipt of custom, she tended to fall asleep. Her grandfather and then her

mother had run hairdressing establishments, so it had seemed the

natural thing to carry on, only on her own terms and with her own ideas

in a contemporary form. She would really have liked to be a guru,

founder of her own mystic cult, but had been obliged to compromise and

settle for soothsaying.

In the underclothes she had taken off the night before with a baggy red

velvet dress on top and a knitted shawl, she glanced into the mirror.

Even to her uninterested eyes her hair looked in a bad state, dry and

sprinkled white with dandruff. She tied it up in a red and purple scarf,

rinsed her hands, splashed water on her face, and stumped downstairs.

Her temper, never sunny, was going from bad to worse. She had intended

to spend the day at a field event organized by her water-divining teacher.

A final attempt at getting hold of Danila failed and Shoshana perched

herself reluctantly on the high stool behind the counter. The first client

to arrive thought he recognized her as the old woman he had once seen

in a Turkish village and from whom he had bought a carpet in the

market square.

It had been the worst night of his life. He had slept fitfully, waking every

hour with a raging thirst. The most horrible thing was opening his eyes

for the final time at nine in the morning and, for a moment, forgetting

entirely what had happened and what he had done. Memory returned

almost at once and he groaned aloud.

There had been dreams and in one of them a creature had come across

the roofs, climbed on drainpipes to his own window, and tried to make

its way in. At first he thought it was a cat, but when he saw its human

face, the staring eyes and the great gash in the forehead, he screamed

aloud. After that he lay trembling, wondering if old Chawcer had heard.

It was only when he finally got up that the drink of the night before hit

him. He poured water down his throat but it seemed to have no effect.

His head felt sore all over as if it had been rubbed with sandpaper and

an ache inside moved about, sometimes over his eyes, sometimes behind

one ear or at the back of his neck. He remembered reading somewhere,

in one of those interviews she gave, that Nerissa never drank anything

alcoholic but subsisted on sparkling water and vegetable juices. Having a

bath helped him a little, he felt he wasn't strong enough to face the

challenge of a shower, all that water drumming on to the top of his head.

But he was almost too weak to get out of the bath and when he was

standing on the bathmat, the towel around him, he staggered and almost fell.

Dressing was a long, slow process because movement made the pain in

his head shift from front to back and ears to eyes. It was the worst

hangover he had ever known. Not a heavy drinker in normal

circumstances, he went straight to alcohol in moments of stress. I'm not

used to it, that's the trouble, he said to himself. People who were always

getting hungover recommended eating, or drinking milk, or the hair of

the dog. The thought of any of it made him retch. Once he had been sick

he felt slightly better, able to stand upright, drink more water, and put

into a carrier bag his blood-stained underpants and her clothes—a black

Wonderbra and the hated tights, black leather miniskirt and boots,

skimpy pink sweater, and a cream-colored faux fur jacket. Cheap stuff,

he judged it, accustomed as he was to the wardrobes of Colette Gilbert Bamber and her friends, supermarket stuff, not even chain store. Her

mobile was inside her pink plastic handbag along with her purse with

five pounds fifty in it—he put that in his pocket—a Switch card, a

compact of bronzing powder, a red lipstick, a hairbrush,
and her door
keys.

He didn't want to think about what had happened, but he
couldn't help

it: her blood running down his beautiful portrait, her eyes
looking at him.

Well, she had asked for it, she had only got what she
asked for, talking

about Nerissa like that, daring to find fault with her skin.
Jealous, of

course. Still, she should have known better than to have
said those

things to him. She should have recognized him as a
dangerous man and

should have ...

His train of thought was abruptly cut off by the sound of
the door to the

next room closing. He put a hand up to his chest and
clutched at the

fabric of his sweatshirt, bunching it up in his fist, he
didn't know why,

perhaps to hold it against his heart. It was all he could do
to stop himself

letting out a moan of fear. Had whoever it was gone into
that room or

been in there and come out of it? He heard footsteps
cross the floor, a

noise as if someone had tripped over, and held his breath.
A drawer was

opened, then another. The walls must be very thin up
here. The old bat it

was, of course. He knew her step, an old person's slow
and heavy tread.

But why was she in there? He couldn't remember a
previous occasion.

She must have heard something in the night, that girl crying out or

falling to the floor or even his own movements with bucket and

scrubbingbrush. Suppose she wanted to come in here and saw that

blood on the wall?

There's nothing for her to see in there, he said to himself, and repeated

it, nothing for her to see, nothing. But he would have to know, he

couldn't just leave it. Very carefully he opened the front door and put his

head round it. The door to the bedroom where she lay under the

floorboards was a little ajar. His head ached all over now, a vicious,

squeezing, throbbing pain. But he came out, wearing his jacket, carrying

the bag with herclothes, the flat key in one pocket, car keys in another.

He must have made some sort of sound, one of those involuntary moans

or sighs he seemed to have been making all night, for suddenly, as he

stood there, Miss Chawcer stumped out of the room and gave him a very

unfriendly look.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Cellini."

Who did you think it was, Christie? He'd have liked to say that but he

was afraid, of her and of the Rillington Place killer too. Of his spirit or

whatever it was he'd imagined haunted this place. She said,

incomprehensibly, "You look as if you have been frightened by a revenant."

"Pardon?"

"A ghost, Mr. Cellini, a phantom. 'Revenant' means that which has come back."

He couldn't stop her seeing the shiver that passed through him. Yet he

was furious. Who did she think she was, a bloody schoolteacher and him

in the first form? She gave a merrier laugh than he had ever heard come from her.

"Don't tell me you're superstitious."

He wasn't going to tell her anything. He wanted to ask her what she had

been into that room for but he couldn't do that. It was her house, the

rooms were all hers. Then he saw she was holding something, an old

calendar, it looked like, and a book. Maybe she'd been in there to find

those things. A load floated from his shoulders, hovered there, lifting the

headache. She took a step back, closed the door behind her. "Someone

should report that Indian man to the powers that be."

He stared. "What Indian man?"

"The one in the turban with the chickens or whatever they are." She

crossed ahead of him to the top of the stairs, turned her head. "Are you

going out?" She made it sound as if he were breaking the rules.

"After you," he said.

He put the bag of clothes into the boot of the car, drove to a row of bins

and, opening the clothes bank, dropped her skirt onto the tray. The bin

was nearly full and it was with difficulty that he was able to make the

tray swing and deposit its load. It wouldn't take any more. Maybe for the

rest of the clothes he ought to go some distance away. He found himself

driving toward Westbourne Grove and, reluctant to pass Shoshana's Spa,

turned down Ladbroke Grove toward the Bayswater Road. Thinking of

the spa brought into his mind something she had said to him he had

forgotten until now. Nerissa wasn't a member. Going there, getting that

contract together, chatting up Danila-all of it had been a waste of time.

She ought to have told him Nerissa only went there to have her fortune

told weeks before. That had been another nail in her coffin, he thought. If

ever a woman had asked for what she got, she had.

Driving up the Edgware Road, he passed the Age Concern charity shop

but he dared not take clothes in there. Better the bin on the edge of

Maida Vale and the other in St. John's Wood. While there he went down

the steps in Aberdeen Place and making sure there was no one about, no

boat coming, no watcher at one of the overlooking windows, he dropped

her mobile and her keys into the canal. Returning the way he had come,

he went up Campden Hill Square and parked a little way from Nerissa's house.

Perhaps it was because it comforted him. Just knowing that was her

place and that she lived in it--with all her servants, no doubt, and maybe

a good friend staying--made him feel he had something to look forward

to. He could put the disposal of that girl behind him and move on. What

better place to be in than here, thinking of new ways of getting to meet

Nerissa? It was a pretty house with its white paint and blue front door,

some kind of red flowering plant climbing across it. Her newspaper still

lay on the step with a carton of milk beside it. Any minute now a servant

would open the door and take in paper and milk. Nerissa would be still in

bed. Alone, he was sure, for although he believed he had read everything

written about her, there had been very little about boyfriends and no

scandal, no shaming photographs of her behaving vulgarly with some

man in a club. She was chaste and cool, he thought, waiting for the right

man ...

The door opened. It wasn't a servant but she herself. Mix could hardly

believe his luck. Some of his adoration of her would have been lost if she

had been wearing a dressing gown and slippers but she was in a white

tracksuit and white trainers. He thought, what would happen if I went

up to her and asked for her autograph? But he didn't want her

autograph, he wanted her. She went indoors with the milk and the paper

and the door closed.

Satisfied and tranquilized by the sight of her, he drove home, went

upstairs and nailed down the floorboards in the room where he had put

Danila. He'd have a rest and something to eat and then he'd start

painting that wall.

In the head office on Monday morning Ed was waiting for him and Ed

was furious. "I've been bombarded with calls from those two clients all

weekend, I've been persecuted, thanks to you. One of them says she's

buying a new elliptical but she won't get it through us and she'll be going

elsewhere for her servicing. "

"I don't know what you're on about, mate," said Mix.

"Don't you, mate, me. You never went near either of them, did you? You

couldn't even call them and explain."

Now Mix remembered Ed's Friday night call. It had come just after he

had ... Don't think of that. "I forgot."

"Is that all you've got to say? You forgot? I was very sick, I'll have you

know. My temperature was high and my throat was killing me."

"You've recovered very fast," said Mix, unwilling to stand much more of

this. "You're looking pretty fit to me."

"Fuck you," said Ed.

He'd get over it. Things never lasted long with Ed, Mix thought. If only

he could find out when Nerissa was likely to revisit Madam Shoshana. He

was sure that if he met her on the stairs he'd be able to get a date with

her. Driving to his firstcall, a workout fanatic who had five machines in

her privategym in Hampstead, he began a fantasy of that stairs meeting.

He'd tell her he recognized her at once and now he'd met her he wouldn't

go to Madam Shoshana, his fortune and his fate weren't important, but

he had something special he wanted to say to her if she'd let him take

her to a natural juice bar just a few steps down the street. Of course she

would. Women loved that line about something special to tell them and

whereas shewouldn't be interested in clubs or pubs, the idea of a natural

juice bar would appeal to her. She'd be in her white tracksuit and when

they entered the bar all eyes would be on her--and on him. He'd even

drink carrot juice to please her. When they were seated he'd tell her he'd

worshiped her for years, he'd say she was the most beautiful woman in

the world and then he'd ...

Mix found himself in Flask Walk almost before he knew it, and the

exercise junkie waiting with the front door open. She wasn't much to

look at, stringy and with a big nose, but flirtatious and with a lithe and

lively air about her, which led him to think that there might be

something doing. She stayed, watching and admiring, while he adjusted

the belt on the treadmill.

It must be great to be so good with your hands," she gushed.

He stayed much longer than he had expected, missing the call he had

promised to make to a woman in Palmers Green, but she was soft, a

pushover, she wouldn't complain.

It wasn't until she had posted the letter to Dr. Reeves in Woodstock that

a very unpleasant thought came to Gwendolen. Suppose he had truly

loved her and then he heard about her visit to Rillington Place. Not when

she made that visit, of course, because that had taken place before

Christie was even suspected of murdering anyone. Christie wasn't the

infamous, appalling creature he had become when his crimes came to

light and histrial began, but a nobody, an ordinary little man living in an

insalubrious place. If Stephen Reeves had heard about the visit in those

earlier days it would have had no effect on him.

Yet only suppose he had known of the visit at the time because, while

making house calls, he had seen her go there. After all, on the very day

after she and Bertha had gone to see Christie, she had consulted Dr.

Reeves for the first time, and what more likely than that he had

recognized her as the woman he had seen in Rillington Place the day

before? It would have meant nothing to him then but, at the start of

Christie's trial, all of it would have come back to him, and as the vulgar

people put it, he put two and two together. He had told her in

January that he was awfully fond of her, and when Christie's trial began

she was certain he had been on the point of proposing to her. Eileen

Summers was to be told he no longer cared for her. Gwendolen Chawcer

was his true love. But when he read in the newspaper that Christie had

lured women to his house by claiming to carry out illegal operations he

would naturally have thought Gwendolen had gone there for an abortion.

Oh, the horror of it! The shame! Of course, no decent man would want to

marry a woman who had had an abortion. And a doctor would be even

more set against such a thing.

Gwendolen walked along Cambridge Gardens, thinking of all this and

growing more and more dismayed. If only she hadn't posted the letter!

She would write another, that was the only thing to do, and she wouldn't

wait for a reply. Believing what he did about her, he very likely wouldn't

deign to answer her at all. No wonder he hadn't been to her mother's

funeral or come back to see her. No wonder he had married Eileen

Summers after all. She was brooding along these lines when she came

face to face with Olive Fordyce who was walking along with Queenie

Winthrop. Queenie had a shopping trolley that she leaned on as if it were

a walker, and Olive had Kylie on a lead.

"Goodness, Gwendolen, you were lost in a dream," said Queenie. "In

another world. Who were you thinking about? Your fancy man?" She

winked at Olive, who winked back.

It was too near the bone for Gwendolen. "Don't be stupid."

"I hope we can all take a joke," Queenie said rather distantly.

Here Olive intervened. "Let's not quarrel. After all, who have we got but

each other?"

This went down badly with the other two. "Thank you very much, Olive.

I really appreciate that." Queenie drew herself up to her full five feet one.

"I have two daughters, in case you've forgotten, and five grandchildren."

"We can't all be so lucky," said Olive peaceably.
"Now, Gwen, while I've
got the opportunity, I want to ask you a very great favor.
It's my niece.

May I bring her to see you some time this week because
she really is
dying to see your house?"

"You say that." Gwendolen spoke grumpily. "But she
won't come, she
never does. I go to all that trouble and she can't put
herself out to come."

"She will this time. I promise. And you needn't bother
with cakes. We're
both on a diet."

"Really? Well, I suppose she can come. You'll go on and
on about it
until I say yes."

"Could we say Thursday? I promise I won't bring my little
dog. That's a
lovely ring you're wearing."

"I wear it every day," said Gwendolen distantly. "I never
go out without
it."

"Yes, I've noticed. Is that a ruby?"

"Of course."

Gwendolen made her way home, cross and dismayed.
Nevermind about

that silly Olive and the niece, they were just a minor
nuisance like a

mosquito buzzing round one's bedroom in the night. Nor
did Olive's never

before noticing the ring matter much. Her only true
concern was with

Stephen Reeves. The post would have been collected by
now and that

letter would be on its way to Woodstock. She must write again and put things straight. All these years he might have been thinking of her as a woman of low morals. He must be made to see her in her true light.

Chapter 12

It was to be a long time before the disappearance of Danila Kovic was

known to the police. She had been a solitary girl, come to London from

Lincoln at Madam Shoshana's command, having no London friends but

Mix Cellini. The room in Oxford Gardens had been found for her by a

London acquaintance of her mother's. Danila had never met this woman

or her husband, never been to her home in Ealing and heard nothing

from her. As for her mother, she had come to Grimsby as a refugee from

Bosnia, bringing her small daughter with her and, her husband having

been killed in the war, had remarried. Danila sometimes said--when she

had someone to say it to that her mother was less interested in her than

in her present husband and their two sons. Packing her off to London

was a way of getting rid of her.

When she had been in London a month her mother died of cancer.

Danila went home for the funeral but her stepfather made it plain he

didn't want her staying with him. She went back to Notting Hill, virtually

alone in the world, nineteen years old, not particularly attractive, without

skills and, with one exception, without friends.

By the middle of the week, when she still hadn't come to work, Madam

Shoshana washed her hands of her and worried only about finding

someone else to do her job. If she thought of Danila at all, it was to

conclude that she had got fed up with the job or gone off with some man.

In Shana's experience, there was always some man about for a girl to go

off with. These days people seemed to wander about the country, and

about Europe for that matter, whenever the fancy took them. Danila

need not think she was keeping the job open for her.

Kayleigh Rivers hadn't been close to Danila. They had never been to

each other's homes, but they had twice been for a meal together and

once to the cinema. She was the nearest to a friend Danila had and the

only person who knew her to worry about where she might now be.

Behind the counter in her Turkish carpet seller's costume, Shoshana

phoned an agency she had used before, the Beauty Placement Centre,

and was sent a temp. Just in time, as she had a new client coming to see

her when she was wearing her soothsayer's hat.

A spiteful message left on his mobile warned Mix not to bother to come to

Ed and Steph's engagement party. He wouldn't be welcome. The party,

said Ed, was for friends and well-wishers, there would be no room at the

Sun in Splendour for those who failed to keep their promises.

"What a carry-on over nothing," said Mix aloud in the car.

On that terrible night when the girl had provoked him into beating her

to death, when she had asked for it as plainly as if she'd said, "Kill me,"

there had been moments of thinking his chances of meeting Nerissa

forever ruined. But as the days went by he began to feel better. He forced

himself--he was proud of this--to phone the spa and ask for Danila. The

reply he got hugely raised his spirits.

"Shoshana's Spa. Kayleigh speaking."

"Can I speak to Danila?"

"Sorry, Danila's left. She doesn't work here anymore."

It wasn't difficult to interpret that as meaning they thought she'd given

up her job. If they were worried, if they thought she might have been

abducted or murdered or both, they wouldn't have said she'd left. They'd

have said something about her being missing. Maybe, he thought, she'd

never bemissed, maybe there was no one to look for her or care what had

happened to her. He'd read somewhere that thousands of people

disappear every year and are never found.

Almost as an afterthought, he asked to speak to Madam Shoshana.

"I'll see if she's free."

She was and he made an appointment. On a Wednesday afternoon,

going upstairs, Danila had met Nerissa coming down. Why shouldn't he

meet her this Wednesday? Of course, it hadn't been a Wednesday

afternoon but a morning on someother weekday when he'd seen her go

into the spa. Still, he pinned his faith on her going to Shoshana

tomorrow.

If that failed, he'd somehow sabotage her car and then be on hand to

repair it for her or at least advise her. It was a bold stroke, but it might

really work, and with speed. He'd see her trying to start the car and

failing and then he'd go over and very politely offer his services. Mix lost

himself in this new fantasy. She'd be so grateful when she heard the

engine tum overthat she'd invite him in for a drink. People like her never

drank anything but champagne and she'd always have a bottle waiting

on ice--but no, he remembered he'd read that she didn't drink at all. But

she'd have champagne for visitors. They'd sit and talk and when he'd told

her about his long devotion to her and about the scrapbook, she'd ask

him if he'd like to come to apreiere with her that evening as her escort.

He had to get to know her first. Was there something he could do to run

the battery down without her knowing? He'd find out, ask around, and

then he'd do it. All he needed after that were jump leads. He pictured her

struggling to make the engine fire. She'd look so beautiful, the exertion

and the stress bringing a faint flush to her golden skin, her dainty foot

wildly pressing, but in vain, on the accelerator, at this point he'd go

over to her, say, "Can I help, Miss Nash?"

She'd say, "You know my name!"

The enigmatic smile he'd give would excite her curiosity.

"It's the battery, don't you think?"

It looked like it, he'd say, but luckily he happened to have jump leads

with him. Once he'd recharged the battery, she ought to drive the car

around a bit to stop it getting flat again. Would she like him to drive it?

Of course she could sit beside him while he drove. Rather than her

inviting him in that first time, this was a more realistic scenario. He'd

take her down to Wimbledon Common or maybe Richmond Park and

she'd be so thrilled by his driving and the masterful manner in which he'd

taken over car and her, that she'd say yes immediately when he asked if

he could see her again. No, he wouldn't ask if, but when.

He got to Shoshana's Spa half an hour earlier than the appointed time,

so he managed to park the car on a meter-he'd feed that once the traffic

warden had gone around the corner-then sat in the driving seat and read

another chapter of Christie's Victims. Reggie hadn't seemed to think

much about finding girls. If he wanted one girl he got her to come to his

house, fixed up that gas arrangement ostensibly to cure her catarrh

and abort her, and when she passed out he strangled her. Screwed her first,

of course. Mix didn't fancy that part of it, he couldn't have had sex with a

dead girl, but to do that was Reggie's sole motive. And he killed how

many? Mix had only got so far as the death of Hectorina McClennan and

he thought there were more to come. Not old Chawcer, though, she was

the one that got away. For his own part--and he considered this in a cool

practical way of which he was proud--he probably wouldn't kill anymore.

It was a lot of trouble, especially covering one's tracks afterward. Except

Javy. Now he'd killed once, the idea of doing it again, and doing it when

he really wanted to, seemed less formidable.

He read another couple of pages, saw rather ruefully that there

were only three more chapters to go, put the marker in his book and,

checking on the traffic warden, a further two pounds in the meter, and

rang the bell at Shoshana's. She answered in a deep thrilling voice and

he could tell she had someone with her. He heard her say, more briskly,

"I'll see you next week." The door slid open when he pushed it. His throat

dried and his heart beat faster at the prospect of meeting Nerissa on the

stairs, but the woman coming down was middle-aged and overweight. It

couldn't be helped, he'd hear his fortune and try to find out the times she

came; he'd ask if necessary.

The room where Shoshana sat was like nowhere he had ever seen

before. It was very hot and, for the time of day, very dark. His sensitive

nose smelled tobacco smoke. There seemed to him something not only

eccentric but actively unpleasant in pinning the curtains together with

those great clumsy brooches. He tried not to look at the owl and, with an

even more deliberate turning aside, at the wizard in gray robes positioned

behind Shoshana's chair. She herself he had expected to be a glamorous

figure, skillfully made-up and svelte, as would befit the proprietor of a

beauty spa. Little of her was visible but what he could see was enough:

wizened face and sharp black eyes peering out of stormcloud-colored

draperies.

"Sit down," she said. "Will you have the stones or the cards?"

"Pardon?"

"Am I to look into your future by means of gemstones or cards?" She

frowned. "I suppose you know what cards are." She produced a greasy

pack from a concealed pocket in her topmost layer. "These things. Cards.

Which is it to be?"

"I don't want my fortune told. I want your advice on ghosts."

"Fortune first," she said. "Take a card."

Uncertain whether he would be all right to dig into the pack, he took

the top one. It was the ace of spades. She looked at it and then at him

inscrutably. "Take another."

She had shuffled the first card he took back into the pack but still when

he picked one it was the ace of spades. Even in the gloom he could see

that her face had fallen. She looked like a woman who has just been told

a dreadful piece of news, dismayed but still incredulous.

"What is it?" he said.

"Take another."

This time it was the queen of hearts. A faint smile touched her lips. She

took the card from him, set the pack facedown on the table and, taking

from a black velvet drawstring bag one piece of colored crystal after

another, black, translucent white, purple, pink, green, and dark blue,

arranged them in a circle, round a white lace mat.

"Place your hands on the mandala."

"What's that--what you said?"

"Place them inside the ring of stones. That's right. Now tell me which of

the sacred stones you can feel drawn closer to your fingers. There will not

be more than two. Which two are drawing gradually toward you?"

Mix could neither feel nor see any movement of the stones but he wasn't

going to say so. He frowned and said in a very serious voice, "The white

one and the green one."

Shoshana shook her head. She had never been known to tell clients

they were right. In fact, her policy being to undermine them and make

them feel ignorant, her popularity rested on the superior wisdom they

saw in her, contrasted with their own inadequacy. "You are wrong," she

said. "The lapis and the amethyst are in your Ring of Fate today. Both are

pushing hard but your fingers are putting up a stubborn resistance. You

must slacken, cease to fight against them and bid them come."

The stones failed to move for Mix but he fancied a slight shift in the

stance of the gray-robed figure behind Shoshana's chair. The hand that

held the staff of twisted snakes had seemed infinitesimally to rise. He

meant not to speak of it, but he was frightened now and the words came

out.

"That thing--that man behind you--it moved."

"So you do have something of the inner vision," said MadamShoshana,

adding, "Just a hint of it. The stones have retreated now. Leave them."

Mix couldn't make out if she meant the wizard figure really had moved,

due perhaps to some mechanism inside it, or that he was possessed of

the same sort of imagination as hers. Hec clenched his fists to keep his

hands from shaking.

"Your fateful balance is badly awry," she began. "The stones speak of

self-doubt and suspicion, of fear that some sin will be discovered. Apart

from that, they are silent, keeping their own counsel. Now to the cards.

There is death in them." She lifted her head and stared at him

enigmatically. "I would avoid telling you if I could, but you drew the ace

of spades twice, and in the face of that I would fail in my duty if I did not

warn you of the danger of death. You also drew the queen of hearts and

she, as all must know, means love. I see a beautiful dark woman.

She may be for you or not for you, that I cannot see, but you will meet her

soon. That is all."

Mix got up. "That'll be forty-five pounds," she said.

"Will you take a check?"

"I suppose so, but no credit cards."

He had sat down again to write the check and had got as far as the date

when the original purpose of his visit came back to him. "I wanted to ask

you about a ghost I may have seen."

"What d'you mean 'may'?"

"It's a murderer who used to live around where I live. He killed women

and buried them in his garden. I've seen something--I think. I thought I

saw his ghost in the house where

"That is where he killed these women?"

"Oh, no. But I reckon he used to go there sometimes. Would he--would

he come back?"

Madam Shoshana sat quite still, apparently lost in thought. After a full

minute, she spoke. "Why not? You had better come and see me again in

a week's time. By then I shall have decided what should be done.

Remember, this will need the greatest care and spiritual protection.

Meanwhile, if you see it again, hold up a cross toward it. There is no

need to throw the cross, just hold it up."

"All right," said Mix, pleased he had the one Steph had given him. He

felt much more secure and doubted that he'd go back.

"That'll be another ten pounds."

Once he had gone, Shoshana lit a cigarette. Her next appointment

wasn't for half an hour. She was used to the gullibility of clients and no

longer marveled or even sneered at it, as she had done in her early days.

They would believe anything. She was herself a curious mixture of a

ribald derision of all things occult and a certain credulousness. That

small leaven of faith had to exist for her to follow her chosen path in life.

For instance, she had no doubt about the efficacy of water-divining and

the value of exorcism among other rituals. But she was fully in favor of

helping things along with practical aids. For instance, the pack of cards

she used consisted entirely of aces of spades and queens of hearts. She

had bought it from a jokeshop. The stones had belonged to her

grandfather who had collected them on his Oriental travels, and the

wizard figure was a reject from a junk shop in the Porto bello Road. She

had found it thrown in a skip on top of a nylon tiger skin and a portrait of

Edward VII.

But yet ... These "but yet's" were not insignificant in her interpretation

of her vocation. The fortunes she told were based on nothing more than

her imagination and her observation of human beings. What the stones

did or the cards showed was irrelevant. Her ignorance of crystallogomancy

was profound and her knowledge of divination by cards nonexistent. Yet it

was strange, it was a little uncanny, how often her predictions came

close to the truth. Very likely, that young man would die or bring death,

or had already brought it, to someone else. As for the beautiful woman, the streets of Notting Hill were full of them, he might bump into one at any time. Another curious thing, though, was when she reached that point in his fortune, Nerissa Nash had come into her mind and given rise to that description, the beauty and the darkness. He had probably never set eyes on the girl, except in pictures. As for the ghost, all that stuff was rubbish, but if it was also a source of money, she saw no reason why she shouldn't get her hands on it.

Writing
that
second
letter
to
Dr.
Reeves
was
almost

insurmountably difficult. Several times Gwendolen gave up and wandered about the house to stretch her legs and in a vain effort to clear her head.

It would be absurd and inviting ridicule to write to a man that he had

only dropped her because he thought she had had an abortion. She must

attempt circumlocution. She must somehow get around it. Upstairs in

her bedroom, gazing unseeing out of the window, she allowed herself to

dream of what it would have been like to have shared a
bedroom with

him, to go to her wardrobe now and in the camphor odor
that wafted out

when she opened the door, see his suits and summer
raincoat hanging

close beside her own dresses. It could still happen. He
was a widower

now.

She started up the stairs. All her life, since first she could
walk, she had

climbed up and down them. The flight going up to the top
floor hadn't

then been tiled but plain wooden boards covered in
drugget. Whatever

had happened to drugget? You never saw it anymore.
Papa had had them

put down after the woodworm had been found and steps
taken to

eradicate it. Few builders, including plumbers and
electricians, ever

came to St. Blaise House. Exterior painting hadn't been
done since before

the Second World War, no interior painting since eleven
or twelve years

before that. But Papa had been fanatical about
woodworm; worrying

about it kept him awake at night.

She could write to Stephen Reeves that she remembered
his seeing her

in Rillington Place the day before they had met for the
first time. Of

course she couldn't really remember, she didn't even
know for sure if he

had seen her. If he hadn't he would think her very foolish,
he might even

think she had that illness--what was it called? Alzheimer's-
-yes,

Alzheimer's disease.

Otto was sitting, sphinxlike, in the middle of the tiled
flight. "What are
you doing there?"

She couldn't recall ever having addressed him before.
Talking to

animals was ridiculous, anyway. Otto got up, arched his
back and

stretched. He glared at her before leaping down one of
the passages and

crouching in the shadows at the end. Gwendolen
unlocked the door of

the flat and went inside. Everything was again
depressingly neat. What

kind of a fanatic plumped up the sofa cushions before he
went out in the

morning? The Psyche figurine on the coffee table she
thought vulgar, the

kind of thing that came from furniture stores that sold
cream leather

three-piece suites and molded Perspex tables. She picked
it up, finding it

surprisingly heavy.

Its base was felted. It looked as if someone had put it
down, surely by

mistake, into a pool of coffee. What else could have
caused the dark stain

that covered half the base, turning the felt from emerald
to maroon?

"The multitudinous seas incarnadine," quoted Gwendolen
aloud,

"making the green one red."

She was rather pleased with the aptness of that.
Macbeth, of course,

had been talking about blood and Cellini's lump of marble had hardly

stood in a pool of that. The paucity of the book collection in here made

her shake her head. Nothing but works on that man Christie. Which

reminded her she had that letter to write.

Still, she must first visit the room next door to this flat and take

another look at that floor. Contrary to the way she remembered it, the

floorboard wasn't sticking up. Or not much. She must have imagined it,

tripped over something else. She stood, staring down at the splintery old

boards, and suddenly she knew what all the little holes were. They were

woodworm. Papa used to say woodworm were as bad as termites, they

could destroy a whole house. What was she to do?

Indecisively, she stood in the doorway, thinking once more of her letter.

She would make one more attempt at it, perhaps telling him obliquely

that no one should believe gossip-but surely she hadn't been the subject

of gossip? She couldn't tell him not to believe his own eyes. There was a

slight smell in the room she was sure hadn't been there when she last

came in. She would have noticed it. Not a pleasant smell, far from it.

Did woodworm smell? Perhaps. If it got worse, there was no doubt about

it, she would have to get a man in, get those people who did something to

floors and boards and furniture to banish the things.

When she had written her letter she would look them up in the phone

book. There was something called the Yellow Pages, and though she had

never opened it since it was left on her doorstep, she would do so now.

Chapter 13

"Newfangled"

was

a

word

that

figured

predominantly

in

Gwendolen's vocabulary. She applied it to most things which, in another

favorite phrase, had "arrived on the scene" since the sixties. Computers

were newfangled, as were CDs and the means of playing them, mobiles,

answerphones, parking meters and clamping (though she enjoyed seeing

a clamp on an improperly parked car), color photographs in newspapers,

calories and diets, the disappearance of telegrams, and of course, the

Internet. In respect of most innovations, she managed to ignore them.

But the Yellow Pages was a book and with books of any sort she was

familiar. Papa used to say that if he were in some isolated place with no

company and only the telephone directory to read, he would read that.

Gwendolen wouldn't go quite so far, but she didn't find this directory of

services as newfangled and incomprehensible as she had feared.

There were whole pages devoted to firms that treated woodworm. It was

difficult to know which to select. Certainly not a facetiously named one,

such as Zingy Zappers (Let Zingy Zappers zap your woodworm and dry

rot) or anything commercial or industrial. Eventually she chose Woodrid,

mainly because it was near at hand in Kensal Green. This did nothing to

mitigate the horror of failing to get through to a live human voice on the

phone. She had to press key 1, then 2, did it wrong and had to begin all

over again. After she'd got over these difficulties she was asked to press

something called "pound" and had to ask for an explanation. When there

was no response from the automated voice to her inquiry she reasoned

that since it wasn't a figure or a star it must be that thing that looked like

a crooked portcullis. It was. She waited and waited while music was

played, the kind of newfangled music that thumped out of cars being

driven by young men down her street on Saturday nights. At last she was

through but was told, to her dismay, that a "representative will come and

make a survey" two weeks and four "working days" hence.

The phone call exhausted her and she had to lie down in the drawing

room for a rest and half an hour's read of *The Origin of Species*. Olive was

bringing her niece to tea. She had said both of them were on diets, but

Gwendolen knew how seriously she should take that. It just made things

more difficult, for they wouldn't want simply to drink tea but would

expect calorie free crispbread, low-fat cake, or other newfangled

nonsense. Besides, Gwendolen, who never put on weight no matter

what she ate, liked something substantial for her tea. These people never

thought what a lot of trouble they were causing others.

She and Stephen Reeves had so much in common. There was no reason

to believe his tastes had changed. Gwendolen believed that people

changed very little, only pretended to as part of a showing-off campaign.

Stephen had loved his teas, sandwiches, and homemade cakes, especially

her Victoria sponge. When they met again, would she be capable of

making a Victoria sponge for him? But the letter still had to be written, if

not today, tomorrow or the next day. The more she thought about

disabusing his mind of the impression he must have got of her, the more

awkward it seemed to have to explain to a man how she hadn't had an

abortion but was accompanying someone else who nearly had. And that

itself might appear reprehensible in his eyes.

Perhaps she could find a subtle way of doing it. She could begin

practicing now and once more she took pen and paper. Dear Dr. Reeves ...

Why should the words "illegal operation" even have to be used? Dear Dr.

Reeves, I remembered something about our affection--no, that wasn't

right, it had been more what they called a "relationship" today--I

remembered something about our relationship, yours and mine, after I

had posted my previous letter. That would do, that was quite good. And

she hadn't called him Dr. Reeves for a long time before they parted.

Dear Stephen, After I had posted my previous letter I remembered

something about our relationship, yours and mine, which had slipped my

mind. The day before we met in your surgery where I went to consult you

about a minor ailment ... Should she put the date of that meeting?

Perhaps not ... about a minor ailment I did not comment on the fact that

we had seen each other the day before. She couldn't know that he had

seen her, any more than she had seen him, he might have been miles

away and his desertion of her due to some quite other cause. But, no,

that couldn't be. He had loved her, she knew he had, no doubt continued

to love her but felt, in the circumstances, that she would make an

unsuitable wife for a medical practitioner. As indeed she would have if

she had done what he thought she had.

She glanced up at the time and it gave her a shock. Olive, with or

without her niece, would be here in an hour and she hadn't yet bought

the cakes. She couldn't even be sure she had enough milk. This letter

would have to wait till later or even until she had had a reply to the first one.

For all Olive had said about her niece's passion for old London buildings,

Hazel Akwaa showed little interest in St. Blaise House. She turned out to

be a quiet well-mannered woman who drank her tea and ate a plain

biscuit in silence while Olive chattered. Olive wore black trousers with

bell bottoms and a red sweater patterned with fir trees and people skiing,

more suitable for someone a third of her age, but her niece was in a gray

wool dress with a valuable-looking gold necklace. When Olive introduced

her, Gwendolen had to ask her first to repeat the surname, then to spell

it, it was so outlandish, it sounded African. Gwendolen knew her Rider

Haggard from childhood and thought she remembered a character from

She or King 'Solomon's Mines called Akwaa. Surely Hazel whatever-hername-had-been hadn't married an African?

"Would you like to see over the house?" Gwendolen asked when tea was

over. "There are rather a lot of stairs."

She expected the woman to say she wouldn't let a little obstacle like

stairs put her off, but Mrs. Akwaa looked far from enthusiastic. "Not

particularly, if you don't mind."

"Oh, I don't mind. I can go up there whenever I choose, of course. I was

going for your sake, Mrs. Akwaa."

"Hazel, please. I can see this lovely room from where I'm sitting and I

doubt if the rest of the house can be more beautiful than this."

Gwendolen was mollified by this gracious remark. She decided to

unbend a fraction. "And where do you live?"

"Me? Oh, in Acton."

"Really? I don't think I've ever been there. And how will you get home?"

Gwendolen made it sound as if her guest lived in Cornwall and she

wanted to get rid of her as soon as possible. "Not in an underground

train, I trust? You take your life in your hands using those."

"My daughter said she would come and fetch us at five-thirty. We shall

all go back to my home for supper."

"How nice. And would that be the paragon your aunt is always telling me about?"

"I don't know about 'paragon,' " said Hazel Akwaa in nearly as cold a

tone as Gwendolen's. "I have only the one daughter. Her father and I

think she's very special but we are her parents, after all. Would you mind

telling me where your toilet is?

"Gwendolen smiled her tiny half-smile. "The lavatory is on the first floor,

the door facing you at the top of the first flight of stairs."

She decided, in Hazel Akwaa's absence, to tell Olive about the

woodworm. "I have just been up there to examine it again. I've sent for

Woodrid, but like all these firms today they mean to keep me waiting over

a fortnight before they'll come. I don't suppose the floor will collapse in a

fortnight." She gave a small humorless laugh. "Do you happen to know if

woodworm smells?"

"I really don't know, Gwen. I've never heard of it smelling."

"Perhaps it was my imagination. I'd take you up and show you only that

great-niece of yours is coming in five minutes."

Hazel came back, followed by Otto. "Your lovely cat rubbed himself

against me and when I stroked him he followed me down."

"Yes, it does seem to bestow its favors on some people," said Gwendolen

in the sort of voice that implied there was no accounting for tastes.

Watching outside Nerissa's house in Campden Hill Square, Mix was

rewarded by the sight of her coming out of her front door soon after halfpast four and getting into her car. This time she was elegantly dressed in

a honey-colored trouser suit and a large golden hat that she took off and

deposited on the passenger seat. She drove past him down the hill,

slowing and turning her head briefly to stare at him. He was pleased.

She'll know me again, he thought.

He had one more call to make before going home. This was at a house

in Pembroke Villas, home of one of those rare clients who possessed a

treadmill and actually used it, if not daily, three or four times a week.

The belt on the machine had shifted on its rollers too far to the left and

Mrs. Plymdale wasn't strong enough, despite all her working out, to ply

the spanner and fix it herself.

Her house had a drive on which he could park his car. He

congratulated her on her adherence to exercise, adjusted the belt and

oiled the machine. But the belt really needed renewing and he advised

her to order a replacement now. The visit was completed in fifteen

minutes and he was free for the rest of the day. He drove home via the

Portobello Road, Ladbroke Grove, and Oxford Gardens, stopping on the

way to buy a half-bottle of gin, a bottle of red wine, and a frozen chicken

masala.

The late afternoon was very hot and the wind had dropped. He thought,

I wonder if they've started looking for that girl, that Danila, there's been

nothing in the papers so no one's told the police. He was afraid to find

out but at the same time he wanted to know. If Shoshana's Spa didn't

care, surely the people she'd rented that room from, surely they'd be

wondering. He turned into St. Blaise Avenue. Outside the house where

he lived, on a single yellow line, was parked a golden Jaguar. Funny, it

looked a lot like Nerissa's from here. But, great cars as they were, one

Jaguar was very much like another. That sharp-faced traffic warden he'd

spotted round the corner would be down on its owner like a ton of bricks.

He couldn't help wishing he'd noted Nerissa's registration number but

he never had. There had seemed no point. He put his own car on the

residents' parking, locked it, and went across the street to the Jaguar.

Her large golden hat was lying on the passenger seat. So the car was

hers. He lifted his eyes, turned around and came face to face with her. He

couldn't be dreaming, it must be real ...

"Nerissa," he said, "it's wonderful to get to talk to you at last." She

raised her large black eyes to his but said nothing. She was standing

quite still, as if in shock.

"You're parked on a yellow line, Nerissa," he said. "The traffic warden

will catch you. Let me move the car for you, Nerissa."

"Miss Nash to you," said a voice from behind her. He had had eyes only

for her, he hadn't seen either of the other two women. They were the kind

who might have been invisible, and he never noticed them. The one who

had spoken said, "My daughter will drive her own car, thank you. She is

about to do so."

Nerissa smiled at him. It was such a radiant smile, sweet, kindly, and

forbearing, that he almost fell on his knees at her feet. "That was very

thoughtful of you," she said, got into the car and tossed the hat onto the

backseat. The window was wound down. "Bye, now."

The car disappeared around the corner just as the warden appeared,

almost running, documentation in hand. Mix stood for a moment on the

hallowed ground where the Jaguar had been, now occupied only by an

empty beer can, a strip of oily rag, and a Magnum ice-cream wrapper.

The warden fancied himself as a wit. "Stay there and you'll get clamped,

sir."

"Ha, ha," said Mix.

He drifted toward the house. So much of what happened to him these

days had this dreamlike quality about it. The dreamswere either glorious

like the most recent, or nightmarish. What had become of reality? Well, it

was real that he had spoken to Nerissa and--wonder of wonders!--she

had spoken to him. And she had been so nice, so charming. She had

called him thoughtful. If that old woman who said she was her mother

hadn't interfered she'd probably have let him move the car, would even

have got in beside him and let him drive her home. But the old woman

had interfered. Mix would have liked to knock her down and trample on

her. How could she be Nerissa's mother with that reddish-gray hair and

that pale dog-face?

The house was always quiet, but this afternoon it seemed unusually

silent. He began to climb the stairs. Nerissa would recognize him another

time. She would come out and speak to him, maybe invite him in for a

coffee. When that happened it would be his chance to ask her out. He'd

take her to that double-barreled Italian place with the funny name that

won the Italian Restaurant of the Year award. Luckily, he'd been able to

save a bit. He'd wanted it for one of those flat-screen TVs, but Nerissa

was far more important.

As he reached the top flight, thoughts of Reggie and his ghost invariably

drove out everything else. Even Nerissa hadn't sufficient power over him

to displace that. It was early, of course, but already dusk and the

passages up here were always dark. Sometimes he thought of shutting

his eyes when he got to the top and letting himself blind into his flat, but

he feared ahead touching him on the shoulder if he did that or a voice

whispering in his ear. Better to face up to it and look. No one was there,

nothing was there. Everything was as it ought to be. Or was it? Mix stood

still, trying to remember. He was almost positive he had shut the door to

the room where Danila lay under the floorboards. He knew he had

because he always did. It had never been left ajar like that in all the time

he'd been here.

Tiptoeing for some reason, he approached the door, thought that

flinging it open would be the best way but opened it stealthily just the

same. The room was empty and very hot. Sun blazed down on the glass.

A smell, not very strong but quite unpleasant, must be coming in

through the open window, only the window wasn't open. He crossed to it

and tried to raise the sash but found this impossible, the sashcords

were broken, one of them dangling. Some of the smells you got in London

were untraceable and seemed to make their way in through cracks in the

fabric of a house. He looked out of the window. The Indian man's guinea

fowl were huddled together on the roof of a low shed, watched by Otto on the wall.

Closing the door behind him, Mix put his key into his own lock. Not

only a strange smell but strange music too. It must have started up while

he was in that room, the sort of music he had never been able to follow

or understand, while some people seemed to like it. He suspected they

didn't really like it but pretended to because it made them seem clever. A

piano, possibly two pianos, tinkled away while someone sawed at a

violin. Where was it coming from? No doubt, the old bat's bedroom. He

went into the flat, thinking about that girl under the floorboards.

Was he going to leave her there? He hadn't intended that at first. The

room next door was just a temporary resting place. ,He'd meant to put

the body in the boot of his car and dispose of it somewhere. Reggie had

never gone so far as that. His victims had all been buried inside the

house or in the garden, but Reggie hadn't got a car, few had in those

days. Of course his own experience was very different from Reggie's. The

necrophile had killed all those women in order to have sex with them as

they lay dying or were recently dead while he, Mix, had killed someone in

self-defense because she said such dreadful things to him. What he had

done was no more than manslaughter.

In Reggie's day, forensics hadn't reached anywhere like the peak of

expertise they had achieved now. Mix knew all about it, as anyone must

who watched television. Now, with all the tests they did, they'd be able to

tell if he'd carried a girl's body in his car, they'd know who she was by

DNA testing. Reggie had to conceal those bodies from his wife until she

became his victim too. He was forced to bury them. Surely things would

be far safer for himself if he left Danila where she was, where no

one would ever have reason to go. But who had been in that room today?

Probably old Chawcer, hunting for more rubbish in the drawers of that

cabinet.

Suppose it had been Reggie's ghost, fascinated by someone else's

concealment of a body? Suppose Reggie, instead of haunting him with

intent to frighten, was watching over him? He'd feel better about it when

he'd been back to Madam Shoshana and heard what she had to say.

But a ghost was equally frightening, he thought, whether it was

threatening you or protecting you. The fact that it was a ghost at all made

you look at the world in a different way. Heshivered, thinking that

perhaps it wasn't too early to mix himself a Boot Camp.

Chapter 14

Abbas Reza noticed Danila's absence only when she failed to pay her

rent. He expected his rents to be paid in cash, preferably fifty-and

twenty-pound checks, put in an envelope and pushed through the

letterbox in his door. No checks and no credit cards. Ms. Kovic hadn't

paid her rent last Saturday and now another week had gone by. He had

already banged on her door to ask for it and got no answer, not even at

half-past midnight. She had never seemed one of those stop-outs to him,

not a night bird at all, but he had been mistaken. Now she'd been in

London a few months she was finding her feet, changing her good ways

for bad ones, as happened to them all. Such was the corruption and

creeping evil of the western world where God was mocked and morals

had flown out of the window. Sometimes she thought with nostalgia of

Tehran, but not for long. On the whole it was better here.

The temp, who was still at Shoshana's Spa, was efficient, better-looking

than the Bosnian girl, and a good advertisement for the spa with that

queenly figure, fine posture, and face like a Nordic goddess. Pity she

wasn't staying. Shoshana had had several replies to her ad and was

interviewing applicants. Clients were coming thick and fast. That fool

who thought he lived in a haunted house had been back and she'd had to

stop herself laughing out loud at his face when she'd told him to avoid

the number thirteen if he didn't want to see the ghost again. She had

almost forgotten Danila's existence.

Kayleigh hadn't. Before she met Mix, Danila would have said Kayleigh

was the only friend she had in London, not that they had ever seen much

of each other socially.

Danila hadn't a phone in her room in Oxford Gardens, so Kayleigh had

made several attempts to call her on her mobile. It rang and rang but

always in vain. Kayleigh wasn't worried yet. If anything had happened to

Danila, like her being mugged or attacked, it would have been in the

papers. She might be ill and not answering her mobile. Still, she wouldn't

go on being ill for a fortnight, and now it was over two weeks since

Danila had failed to answer her phone when Shoshana called

her. Kayleigh went around to the house in Oxford Gardens.

All the rooms and the two flats had entryphones. Abbas Reza was proud

of organizing things properly. Besides, he didn't want visitors waking him

at all hours. Kayleigh rang and rang Danila's bell and when she got no

answer, pressed the key above, which was written rather mysteriously:

Mr. Reza, Head of the House, as if he were a top prefect in a school. A

slender, rather handsome man with a small mustache and hair so black

and glossy it might have been painted on, answered the door. He looked

in his late thirties. "What can I do for you?"

He was polite because Kayleigh was a pretty blonde of twenty-two. "I'm

looking for my friend Danila."

"Ah, yes, Ms. Kovic. Where is she? That's what I ask myself."

"I ask myself too," said Kayleigh. "She doesn't answer my calls and now

you say she's not here. Could we get into her room, d'you think?"

Mr. Reza liked that "we." He smiled reassuringly. "We try," he said.

They knocked on her door first. Clearly, no one was inside. The landlord

inserted his key, turned it and they were in. As he did so, the thought

came to him that she might be lying in there dead. Such things

happened, in Tehran as well as London, unfortunately. What a shock for

this tender and surely uncorrupted young girl! But no, there was

nothing. Nothing but the kind of untidiness they all seemed to live in,

discarded clothes everywhere, an empty teacup with very old tea dregs in

it and, in the sink, under cold water scummed with floating grease, a

plate, a knife, and a fork. The bed had been roughly made. Beside it, on

top of a stack of magazines, was a copy of the Shoshana's Spa brochure,

glossy turquoise and silver.

"She has done a moonshine flit," said Abbas Reza, thinking of his rent. "I

have seen it before, many many times. They leave all like this, always it

is the same."

"I didn't think she was that sort of person. I'm really surprised."

"Ah, you are innocent, Miss-?"

"Call me Kayleigh."

"You are innocent, Miss Kayleigh. At your young youth you have not

seen the wicked world as I have. Your purity is unsullied."

Mr. Reza had

left his wife behind in Iran years before and considered himself free in

amative respects. "There is nothing to be done. We cut our losses."

"I haven't exactly got any losses," Kayleigh said as they went down

again. "Unless you count losing a friend."

"Of course. Naturally, I count." Mr. Reza was thinking that he could sell

Danila's clothes, though they wouldn't be worth much. But while in the

room he had spotted a watch that looked like gold and a new CD player.

"Come, I make you a cup of coffee."

"Oh, thanks. I will."

An hour had passed before Kayleigh emerged once more into Oxford

Gardens, quite high on the strongest and thickest coffee she had ever

tasted and a date for the following evening with the man she was already

calling Abbas. Danila had gone out of her head but she came back into it

now and she found she couldn't altogether agree with her new friend that

his tenant had done a moonlight flit and simply vanished. She's a missing

person, Kayleigh said to herself. The words sounded very serious to her.

She's a missing person, she said again, and the police ought to know.

It was a cooler and duller morning than of late and Mix was once more

sitting in his car at the top of Campden Hill Square. He should have been

at Mrs. Plymdale's. She had called him on his mobile to tell him, but very

nicely, that the new belt he had fixed to her treadmill had come off the

previous evening. Would he come and put things to rights as soon as

possible? Mix had said he'd be with her by eleven in the morning but

instead he was outside Nerissa's house, desperate for a sight of her. It

was as if she were his fix. He had made a call in Chelsea and another in

West Kensington but a further shot of the drug was essential before he

did any more work. Seeing her the week before, speaking to her and she

speaking to him, hadn't improved things. It had made them worse.

Before, he had wanted to get to know her for the fame being with her

could confer on him. Now he was in love.

He waited and waited, reading the last chapter of Christie's Victims, but

looking up every few seconds in case she appeared. It was half-past

midday before she did, dressed in a white skirtsuit, chic and very short,

and incongruous white trainers. She was carrying a pair of white sandals

with four-inch heels. Those shoes were for putting on, he supposed,

when she got to wherever she was going, and the trainers were for

driving. He'd follow her. Having seen her, he couldn't bear her to be out

of his sight. .

She passed him but he wasn't sure if she saw him or not. He followed

her car along Notting Hill Gate and down Kensington Church Street. For

once, there wasn't much traffic and he kept behind her. From

Kensington High Street she went eastward and he did too. At a red light

she turned around and he knew she had spotted him. He waved and she

gave a small half smile before driving on.

Before she went to the police, Kayleigh called Directory Enquiries and

asked them for the number of a Mrs. Kovic living somewhere in Grimsby.

They found just one woman of that name. Kayleigh phoned her and

discovered she was English, a Yorkshirewoman who had married and

divorced a man from Serbia. Danila's mother had been her sister-in-law.

She gave, her a phone number and Kayleigh spoke to Danila's stepfather,

who seemed scared of being involved.

"If anything's happened to her," he said, "I don't want to know. We

didn't get on. It's nothing to do with me."

"She'd no one else," Kayleigh said. "I've been very worried."

"Yes? I don't know what you think I can do. You want to look at it from

my point of view. I've lost my wife, I've got two young boys to bring up.

Me and Danny didn't never have a good relationship, and when I saw her

at the funeral I said I'd go my way and she'd go hers--right?"

It had begun to seem to Kayleigh that no one had cared very much

about Danila. Madam Shoshana had quickly forgotten her existence.

This indifference frightened her. It was very unlike the feelings in her

own family where her parents took a keen interest in everything their

three children did and worried themselves into small frenzies if one of

them wasn't immediately available on the phone. Kayleigh went to the

police in Ladbroke Grove and filled in a missing person form, saying

nothing about the conversation she had had with Danila's stepfather.

Lunch with her agent was Nerissa's reason for going to the restaurant in

St. James's, and the request from a glossy magazine of international

prestige to feature her on their frontcover and run a four-page article

about her, the reason for the lunch. She parked the Jaguar on a meter in

St. James's Square and changed her trainers for the stilt-heeled white

sandals. The lunch would have to be a short one or she'd get clamped. As

she locked the car that man arrived, the one who had spoken to her on

Thursday outside the old lady's house. This was the third time she had

encountered him and she knew with as lightly sick feeling that he was

following her.

He wasn't the first stalker in her life. There had been several, notably

one who persistently called at her parents' house when she was very

young and still lived at home, but her father, who was very large and

very black, a formidable threat in the caller's eyes, had finally

intimidated him. Darling Dad made a wonderful bodyguard. The other

stalker had been rather like the present one, waiting outside her house

and following her. It had been the police who had warned him off. The

funny thing was, Nerissa thought, as she walked through into

St. James's Street, that they all looked very much alike. All were of middle

height, in their early thirties, fair-haired with characterless faces and

staring eyes. This one was following her along King Street now, probably

fifty yards behind. She was a little early for her lunch and she wondered

if she could make some move to shake him off.

The shops in St. James's Street are not the sort a woman can go into

and browse about, if necessary concealing herself behind racks of clothes

or disappearing into the ladies' powderroom. There was nowhere to hide.

If she stopped to look into the hat shop window or crossed the street to

linger outside the rather grand wine merchant's, would he make this as a

reason to speak to her? The thing she mustn't do was look back. The

strap above the high heel of her sandal had slipped down and the shoe

flapped. She bent down to adjust it, felt the presence of someone standing

close by her, unwillingly looked up--and into the face of Darel Jones.

She couldn't have been more delighted if it had been her father and said,

almost involuntarily, "Oh, I'm so pleased to see you!"

He seemed surprised. "Are you?"

"There's a man stalking me. Look. No, he's gone. That's your doing, I'm

sure. He saw you, thought you were a friend of mine, and--and

disappeared. How marvelous."

If he minded being taken for a friend of hers he didn't show it. "This

stalker--that's very serious. You'll have to tell the police."

"I can't keep telling them. He's not the first one, you see. Perhaps he'll

give up now. I always hope they will. But what are you doing here?"

"I might say the same for you. I'm a banker." He pointed to a Georgian

edifice with a brass plate that said Laski Brothers, International Bankers

since 1782. "I work there."

"Do you?" Nerissa had a very narrow idea of what a banker did. "D'you

mean that if I went in there and asked them to cash a check you'd be

behind a glass thing and you'd give me a bunch of notes?"

He laughed. "It's not quite like that. I've come out for my lunch. I don't

suppose you--?"

"I'm lunching with my agent," she said. "I've absolutely got to." She

looked at him with yearning love, thinking of Madam Shoshana's

prediction. "I wish I didn't but I must. "

"I'll say good-bye then." Perhaps it was her imagination but she had

never seen him look quite like that before, interested in her, curious

about her. "You know," he said, "you're quite different from the—the--er,

misconception I had of you," and he was gone.

She went into the restaurant where she could already see her agent

waiting at a table. What did he mean by "misconception"? That he'd

thought she was awful and had found out she wasn't? Or, more likely, in

spite of that look that might have been mere sympathy, that he'd thought

she was nice but now he knew she was horrid? Still, he'd been on the

point of asking her out to lunch ...

The urgent message summoned Mix to the head office. His departmental

manager, Mr. Fleisch, had a few things to say to him. A call had come

from Mrs. Plymdale, no longer soft and easy-going, to complain that the

new belt he had installed on her treadmill had come adrift and though he

had promised to repair it at eleven, he hadn't turned up. She had to use

her treadmill every day or she would get out of the rhythm. She really

needed to exercise. Both her parents had died of heart disease and she

was frantic with worry. Not only that but Mr. Fleisch had heard from Ed

West that Mix had failed to make two essential calls on his behalf that Ed

was prevented from making by illness.

"I've been going through a bad patch," Mix said without further

explanation.

"What kind of a bad patch?"

"I've not been well. I've been depressed."

"I see. I'll make a booking for you with the company's doctor."

Mix would have liked to refuse this offer but he didn't know how.

Matters would only be made worse by his failure to see the doctor, a dour

elderly man, unpopular with the staff. Mix went home. It had been a bad

day. All the time he was following Nerissa he had been planning what he

would say to her when, having gained on her according to plan, she

turned around and saw him. Remind her of last Thursday would be the

first thing, then maybe put in a word about how sorry he was if he'd

offended her mother. Would she show him there were no hard feelings by

coming and having a coffee with him? She had been so sweet and

gracious that previous time that he thought she would, she couldn't really

refuse in the circumstances. And then that man had appeared, a young

good looking man who appeared to be a friend of hers. Just his luck.

But he wouldn't let it put him off.

A message on his mobile summoned him to call on Colette Gilbert-Bamber the minute he finished work. It wouldn't be for something wrong

with the equipment but what Mix called "a bit of the other." He'd still get

forty pounds for the call-out ... If he was so attractive to Colette, surely

he should be to Nerissa? But he wouldn't go. It had been a bad day and

he didn't fancy it.

It was oppressively hot again and the house would be hot and stuffy.

How it could be so dark when the sun was shining brilliantly he didn't

really know. Didn't she ever draw the curtains back? Did she never open

a window? He stood for a moment where Nerissa had stood last week and

spoken to him so sweetly-and her mother so nastily. But he wouldn't

think of that. And he wouldn't hold his arms folded like that across his

body so that he could feel the roll of flesh round his waist that sagged

over the belt of his trousers. Walk, he said to himself, get into a walking

routine tomorrow and do it every day.

The place might have been uninhabited for years, he thought, as he

started up the stairs. Would it do any good if he complained to old

Chawcer about the lighting system, the way the low wattage lamps went

out before he reached the next switch? Probably not. People like her

thrived on darkness. It was ridiculous, anyway, having to put lights on in

summer in the afternoon.

No cat's eyes glowed from the tiled staircase and, thank God, there was

no sign of Reggie. It was all in my mind, he thought, I was right about

going through a bad patch, I must have begun to see things that weren't

there. Whatever Shoshana said, ghosts were always hallucinations, the

result of stress or pressure. The Isabella lights, dull red and green and

purple, lay as still as if they were painted on the floor, but bright golden

sunshine streamed out of his hallway when he opened the door to his flat.

Perhaps, before he went in, he ought to go next door to the room where

Danila was. He really ought to check on her everyday until--well, until

what? He got used to her being there? He'd moved her out and on to

somewhere else? Leaving his own door wide open for the sake of the

cheerful glow of light, he opened the bedroom door next to it.

The same sunshine was in here, or would have been if the window had

ever been cleaned. But he didn't think about that once he had smelled

the smell. It forced him to take a step backward. And now he knew what

it was. For weeks the weather had been almost unnaturally hot,

yesterday had been unbelievably warm, and this smell was the result. He

couldn't understand it; the body was wrapped and nailed down

underfloorboards. He braced himself to go in, closed the door behind

him, no longer thinking of ghosts. This was real; that had been all in his

mind. He had never smelled anything like it and, standing there, taking

in a long inhalation, he shuddered. Why had he come in here this

afternoon when he already felt so bad?

Would it go away? Eventually, perhaps. He found he had no idea

whether decay continued for weeks, months, even years, or if it faded at

last. Old Chawcer might come in here at anytime. He couldn't risk it.

He'd have to go to work and while he was out of the house he'd never

have a quiet moment.

At present there was no point in staying here. After smelling that smell

he felt he would never eat again. Those bodies in Reggie's house,

especially the two he put in the recess in the kitchen wall, they must

have smelled. Perhaps not, for it was December and cold and Reggie had

been caught and arrested soon after he put them there. Mix stood at the

top of the stairs and listened. Utter silence. He peered down the stairwell

and began to move down. He was on the bottom step of the tiled flight

when her bedroom door opened and she came out in a red silk dressing gown and feathered mules. He was about to retreat but she spotted him.

"Is anything the matter, Mr. Cellini?"

"Everything's fine," he said.

She sniffed. "I wish I could say the same. I believe I have the influenza."

Mix had once before in his whole life heard flu called that. His grandma

had had a joke about it: "I opened the window and in flew Enza."

"Hard luck." If she was ill she wouldn't be able to go into that room. If

only she could be very ill and for a long time! "You ought to be in bed," he said.

"I need the bathroom. May I trouble you to do me a great favor and

telephone my friend Mrs. Fordyce--you met her outside my house last

Thursday--and tell her of my--my plight? The number is in the directory

by the phone. Fordyce. Can you remember that?"

"I'll try," said Mix, putting a wealth of sarcasm into his tone. It passed

unnoticed. He went downstairs, thinking it was typical of her to get the

flu on what was probably the hottest day of the year. He could barely see

to find the Fordyce woman's number. Suppose she recognized his voice

from Thursday? He put on an upper-class intonation. "Miss Chawcer has

a virus. She's very unwell. It would be an enormous help if you'd come to

see her tomorrow and maybe her doctor would call, if you know who that is."

"That's Mr. Cellini, isn't it? Of course I'll come. First thing in the morning."

In which case, he'd better be out of there before she appeared, but

without him she wouldn't be able to get in. Well, old Chawcer would just

have to get up and answer the door .He wandered about
and saw she'd

left the back door unlocked. He locked and bolted it. That
would be a fine

carry-on, in a rough area like this, any amount of lowlife
coming in and

helping themselves to whatever they fancied. He was in
enough trouble
without that.

He had never been in this huge living room before.
Drawing room, she

called it. He couldn't understand why unless it was
because people used

to draw pictures in it before the days of television and
radio. The dust

and the musty smell made him wrinkle his nose, but as
smells went,

compared to the stench upstairs it was nothing, nothing.
Light shouldn't

have been needed at this hour but it was always dusk in
this house.The

main light switch didn't work. He went about turning on
table lamps, the

last one on the desk beside several half-finished letters.

Who the hell was she writing to in this crazy way? One
started, "Dear

Dr. Reeves," another, "My dear Doctor," a third, "Dear
Stephen," and the

last, "My dear Stephen." A lot of muddled stuff followed,
all hard to read

in her looped spidery hand, but the finest copperplate
would be difficult

in this twilight. Then a name caught his eye: Rillington
Place. "I know

you saw me in Rillington Place one day in the summer
a very long time

ago. You were driving past, on your way to a call, I expect.
On the

following day I came to your surgery for the first time. As I
am sure you

recall, I and my parents had been patients of Dr. Odess. I
found out,

when the trial of Christie took place, that he had been
that dreadful

man's medical attendant. Not that this, of course, had
anything to do

with our leaving him to come to ... "

A few more words were heavily scored through. She
had written no

more. This proved she had been to Reggie for an abortion,
Mix thought.

Maybe she was writing to this doctor about it because he
was going to do

the job but Reggie would be cheaper. Reggie frightened
her, so she found

someone else to do the termination and this doctor was
offended because

he didn't get the money he'd expected. That must be it.
He'd taken

Chawcer off his list as a result and refused to treat her
anymore. Now,

after all these years, she was writing to explain.

The room wasn't simply dark as a place is before the
lights go on. The

lights were on, table lamps with cracked parchment or
pleated silk

shades, much frayed, but the effect of them was less to
illuminate than

to make shadows. Not one was in an alcove or beside a
wall, so that the

corners were in deep darkness. And it was so hot that the
sweat began to

stream from his face and trickle down his back. Mix thought it the most

dreadful room he had ever been in. With that carved dragon snaking

across the top of the vast sofa and that blotchy mirror in a black and gilt

frame, it could be the setting for a horror film. She could make a bit of

money like that, tell movie people about it and get a fat fee. They

wouldn't have to change a thing.

Switching off the lamps was a creepy task. Darkness yawned behind

him and after the last one was off he went to the French window and

pulled back the long brown velvet curtains with violent jerks. Dust was

shed in great clouds, making him cough. But light came in, plenty of

light to dispel the worst of the horror. If downstairs had been nasty,

holding God knew what secret things and hidden threats, upstairs

loomed forbiddingly, with Reggie perhaps waiting for him and the body

invisibly but surely decaying. It was almost as though it had a new life of

its own, almost as if it were moving as it changed. Don't think of that, he

muttered to himself. Forget what Shoshana said, it was all in your head.

He passed Chawcer's door. There was no sign of the cat and, of course,

none of Reggie. As he'd used to do but hadn't done for a week now, he

closed his eyes when halfway up the tiled flight, opening them at the top

and looking down one passage after another cautiously and fearfully.

Nothing there, not even Otto. Inside his own living room, sitting in a

comfortable chair, a large gin and tonic at his elbow, he told himself

all was well, he was lucky, he'd been reprieved for a while. She'd be too ill

to go up there again and he must use that time, perhaps a week,

somehow to remove the body from that room.

Was there a way of getting it into the garden? Not if that Fordyce

woman was in and out. She might not suspect the truth, she certainly

wouldn't, but she'd tell Chawcer she'd seen him out there, digging. And

Chawcer herself might see him from her window. That bedroom of hers

must occupy the same area as the living room, which meant it had

windows facing both back and front. He dared not take the risk.

You'd better eat something, he told himself, but the thought of food

made his throat close and rise. He was desperately tired. Once he'd had

another gin or a Boot Camp maybe he'd go to bed, even though it was

only six, go to bed and try to sleep. Two messages were on his mobile but

he wouldn't bother with them now, he'd do that in the morning. In front

of Nerissa's picture he paused and made his obeisances,
saying, "I love
you. I adore you."

How she'd smile when they were lovers and she saw her
photo there

and he told her how he'd worshiped it. Comforted, he
wandered into the

bedroom and at the window looked down into the
garden, considering

where it would be best to bury Danila's body. If he could
get there, if he

could gether downstairs and outside. Reggie had done it,
and several

times, though there was an old man living in the house
on the middle

floor and the Evanses at the top. The neighbors had seen
him digging but

thought nothing of it:, exchanging with him the wartime
catch phrase

about Digging for Victory.

There on the left, perhaps where the thick brambles
could be held back

and spread across the dug earth to conceal what he'd
done. Or near the

end by the wall, on the far side of which the guinea fowl
man lived. But

would he get the chance?

On the wall, stretched out to his formidable length, Otto
lay luxuriating

in the evening sun, his eyes closed but the tip of his tail
giving an

occasional flick.

Chapter 15

Having been in the kitchen, put a blackened kettle on the
gas, and cast

her eye around the drawing room, Olive was toiling upstairs with tea on a

tray toward Gwendolen's bedroom. When he had arrived she had rung

the bell and that man Cellini had come down, though with an ill grace,

and been quite surly with her on the doorstep. Speaking to him on the

phone, she had no idea this was the same man who had accosted darling

Nerissa out on the pavement. It was quite a shock when he opened the

door. Naturally, she wasn't very forthcoming either.

The heat in here was punishing. Like being in India at midsummer, stuck in some backstreet ghetto, dusty and smelling nasty.

Somehow she must manage to get windows open. The one in the kitchen

refused to budge. When she'd seen to Gwen she must attempt those in

the drawing room.

Gwen's door was ajar. Olive was concerned at her appearance, the

wasted white face, the weak hands lying limp on the coverlet. When Gwen

spoke in a cracked voice, she had to break off and cough breathily.

"You'll have to see the doctor, dear. No doubt about it."

"Yes, I will. I must." More coughing. "Dr. Reeves. Dr. Reeves will come if

I send for him, he always does."

"I don't know any Dr. Reeves around here, Gwen. Is he new?"

"Papa said to leave Dr. Odess and try the young doctor and we have."

Olive thought it best to ask no more questions.
Answering made poor

Gwen cough so distressingly. "You drink your tea, dear,
and I'll find your

doctor and phone the practice. I expectt he number is in
your phone

directory, isn't it?"

She dragged the carpet sweeper downstairs with her. It
had been in

front of the fireplace so long that dust had settled thickly
on its surfaces.

A hunt for the telephone directory finally resulted in her
finding it on top

of an ancient copper in the washhouse. No Reeves in the
directory but a

Dr. Margaret Smithers. Olive would never have expected
Gwen to have a

lady doctor but very likely, all the lists being overfull, she
hadn't a

choice. It was a scandal, and worse, Olive thought, when
Dr.Smithers's

receptionist said she couldn't come today but would
tomorrow when she

was making her afternoon calls.

"Make sure she does," said Olive sharply.

Gwendolen's coughing sounded all the way downstairs.
Olive went up

again, hanging on to the banister. How much more
sensible it would be,

at Gwen's age, to live in a flat. "The doctor'sc oming
tomorrow."

"I'll wear my new blue dress."

"No, you won't, Gwen. You'll stay in bed. I'm going to
bring you a jug of

water and a glass. You must drink plenty. It's better if you
don't eat. I

told Queenie you were ill and she'll be in at midday. Wheres your door

key?" Gwendolen didn't answer. She was coughing too much. "Never

mind. I'll find it."She did, after a ten-minute hunt.

One of the messages on Mix's mobile was from the departmental

manager to tell him a doctor's appointment had been made for him for

Wednesday, at 2 P.M. The other, from someone called Kayleigh Rivers,

reminded him that he had a contract with the spa and would he come as

soon as possible as a stationary bicycle and a cross-trainer had both

ceased to function.

The spa was the last place he wanted to go near. One of the clients

might remember seeing him chatting up Danila. Besides, he had a kind

of general undefined aversion to the place. He knew he'd feel bad once he

set foot inside. He'd let it go for now and then he'd try to terminate that

stupid contract. The doctor he'd have to go to. He was bound to say there

was something wrong with him, doctors always did, and this would be to

his advantage, a ready-made excuse for forgetting calls and neglecting

jobs. It wasn't that he wanted to skive off work permanently, it was just

that at present he wasn't up to it, what with the body and the smell and

women coming and going in the house at all hours--and Nerissa.

He was down the hill from her house now and had been since nine. It

was therapy for the way he was feeling. At eleven, when she still hadn't

emerged, he gave up for the day, drove himself to Pembridge Road, and

in the secondhand bookshop there, found a new book called Crimes of

the Forties he'd never heard of before. He bought it because it had a

chapter on Reggie.

Back once more in Campden Hill Square, he opened the book to find

there was even less about the Rillington Place murders than he had

thought at first. A bit of a waste of money. Still, the photographs were the

best he had yet seen. The frontispiece, a large picture of Reggie driven to

court, was particularly good. Mix gazed at the rather well-sculpted face,

the narrow mouth and large nose, the horn-rimmed glasses. What would

you do in my position? he asked it. What would you do?

Nerissa saw him from an upstairs window and thought of some action

she might take. Phoning the police, for instance. But he wasn't doing any

harm. He would get tired of waiting, he must surely have work to do, and

she wasn't going out till midday. She would like to have gone for a run

first but that was impossible with him there.

Last evening she'd been sure Darel Jones would call her. He could easily

get her phone number from his mother, who would get it from Nerissa's

mother. She had stayed in all evening, waiting for him to phone. Actually

sat by the phone incase it rang and she couldn't get to it in time. Like a

teenager. Like she was aged fifteen, with her first boyfriend. When it had

gone ten she knew it wasn't going to happen. Plenty of men would phone

after ten, after eleven come to that, but no tDarel. Somehow she knew

that. Disappointed, she had gone to bed early.

Some women wouldn't wait, they'd phone a man themselves. Why

couldn't she? She didn't know, something to do with the way Mum had

brought her up, no doubt. Tomorrow they were going to start on the

shots for that magazine cover, and feature and soon after that the

London Fashion Fair began. S he and Naomi and Christy would be on the

catwalk for that. These were her last days of freedom but instead of

enjoying herself she was standing here at the window, watching a man

watching her. The price of fame, her agent had told her, and then told

her to tell the police. She flinched from doingt hat. Maybe she'd pluck up

her nerve and get into the car, not looking in his direction, go over to her

sister-in-laws, see the baby. Or perhaps she'd wait awhile, give him half

an hour. Madam Shoshana first, the stones or the cards
and the latest

installment of her future foretold. If only that guy would
give up and go.

She had a shower, sprayed herself with Jo Malone's
Gardenia, and

accidentally dropping the cap of the bottle on the floor,
put on combat

trousers and a canary yellow sweatshirt. A difficult shade,
her mother

said, while acknowledging that, with her coloring, she
could wear it.

Letting fall the tracksuit she'd been wearing, leaving
behind her a trail of

tissues, cottonwool, and orange sticks, she took another
look out of her

bedroom window. He was still there. If only this house
had another way

out, an escape route into a back lane as some Notting
Hill houses had.

She should have thought of that before she bought it.

If she didn't hurry she'd be late for her appointment. She went

downstairs, deciding to risk it, run the gauntlet, whatever that meant,

but when she took a final look he was gone. An overwhelming sense of

relief flooded her. Perhaps he wouldn't come back, perhaps he'd had enough.

All the way to Shoshana's she half expected his car to appear suddenly

from a side turning-blue, a small Honda, index number starting LCO

something--but he must have gone. Presumably he did work somewhere.

She was ten minutes late, thanks to him. Mounting the stairs, she

suddenly remembered once coming down them and meeting a young girl

coming up, a dark, sharp-featured girl who reminded her of pictures she

had seen of women in that war in Bosnia. Funny I should think of her,

she thought. Shoshana had told her (when she asked) that the girl

worked at the spa and her name was--was it Danielle?

The room was dark and incense-smelling as ever but today Shoshana

was in black silk with moons and ringed planets embroidered on the

bodice. A veil covered her hair, secured in place by a kind of tiara.

"I'll have the cards, not the stones," Nerissa said firmly.

Shoshana disliked being instructed but she liked the money and

Nerissa was a good client. "Very well." Underlying her words was the

implication: on your own head be it. "Take a card."

The first one Nerissa took was the queen of hearts, and the second and

the third. "You are promised great good luck in love," Shoshana said,

wondering how she had managed to allow three queens to appear in

sequence. The next one had better be the ace of spades. But it wasn't.

Nerissa smiled happily.

"I have never seen such astonishing good fortune," Shoshana said,

hissing and cursing inwardly. She much preferred doom-laden forecasts

but she could hardly invent a negative future when Nerissa so obviously

knew what the queen of hearts signified. "Take a last card."

It was bound to be the ace this time and it was. Shoshana concealed

her pleasure. "A death, of course." She put her hands into the bag of

stones, took out the lapis and the rose quartz and rolled them between

her palms. "It's not you or anyone close to you. It's happened already."

"Maybe it's my great-aunt Laetitia. She died last week."

Shoshana disliked clients coming up with their own interpretations.

"No. I think not. A young person, this is. A girl. I can see no more. The

words were written but clouds have obscured them. That is all."

The cards were put away, the stones replaced in their bag. Nerissa hated

the way the wizard seemed to move when the candles flickered. The white

owl had its amber eyes fixed on her. "Forty-five pounds, please," said

Shoshana.

"That girl I met on the stairs once, she looked nice. Danielle, is she

called?"

"What about her?"

"I don't know. I just thought of her."

"She's left," Shoshana said, opening the door to speed Nerissa on her way.

Two policemen called on Mr. Reza and then at Shoshana's Spa. When

they had been told at both places that Danila Kovic had left her work and

her rented room without notice, without a word to employer or landlord,

they began to take things seriously. Their press release was too late for

the Evening Standard but in time for the BBC Early Evening News and

the next day's papers, where it nearly, but not quite, took precedence

over the "hottest day since records began" story.

Nerissa heard it while baby-sitting for her brother but, in the absence of

a photograph, failed to identify her as the girls he'd seen on the stairs.

Mix also saw the news. He thought he'd been quite worried enough, but

now he understood he had been living in a fool's paradise, continuing to

believe that Danila's disappearance would never be noticed. He had had

another bad day, beginning with his failure to see Nerissa, then a terrible

row with Colette Gilbert-Bamber, who threatened to report his lapses to

the firm if there was ever another. Leaving her house without any lunch

or even a glass of wine, he had had to go straight to the doctor.

Ever since he had known the appointment was to be made he had taken

it for granted he was perfectly well, a young, fit healthy man. The doctor

disagreed. He insisted on taking a blood sample to be checked for

cholesterol. That was on account of Mix's blood pressure, which ought to

have been something like 130 over 40 and instead was an alarming 170

over 60.

"Smoke, do you?"

"No, I don't," said Mix virtuously.

"Drink?"

"Not much. Maybe four or five units a week."

That would have been little more than a single bottle of wine. The

doctor looked at him suspiciously. Exercise, a fat free diet, tablets were

prescribed and no salt.

"Come back and see me in two weeks' time--you don't want to be a

diabetic by the time you're forty, do you?"

Blood pressure could be raised by anxiety, Mix had read somewhere.

Well, he'd had plenty of anxiety recently. The doctor's admonitions had brought on a headache and a queasy feeling. He'd call head office, tell them he wasn't well and go home. Maybe he'd got old Chawcer's flu. The sun was dazzlingly bright today, for once lighting up this gloomy house, showing up the dust that lay everywhere and the cobwebs dangling from defunct hanging lamps and bemused moldings on the ceilings. Someone had opened the downstairs windows and all the curtains were drawn back. He opened a door he had never touched before and found himself looking into a vast room with a dining table down the middle, twelve chairs arranged around it and oil paintings on the walls of dead deer and rabbits, ugly old women in crinolines and cows in fields. On the first landing he met a woman he hadn't seen before, and he immediately thought, she must be the one Reggie hadn't managed to destroy, old Chawcer's daughter. But she was too old for that and she introduced herself as Queenie Winthrop, smiling and for some reason fluttering her eyelashes. "Poor darling Gwendolen is very poorly indeed, Mr. Cellini. She has a temperature of over a hundred degrees. And that doctor won't come until tomorrow afternoon. I call it a disgrace."

Mix, who had grown up measuring degrees in Celsius, thought she had

made a mistake. "What could you expect at her age? "Shame," he said.

"A shame is just what it is. These doctors should be ashamed.

Now, if you can just make her a cup of tea in the morning, I or Mrs.

Fordyce will be in by eight-thirty. We have a key."

"Me?" said Mix feebly.

"That's right. If you'll be so kind. I don't know who will let that wretched

doctor in but one of us will manage it somehow."

"Well, I can't," said Mix, escaping upstairs, and for once forgetting to

look out for Reggie

He sniffed. It seemed to him that he could smell it out here. That might

be in his head too. How did you know which things were real and which

your imagination? Still, he wouldn't go in there this evening. He'd think,

make a plan. It was just after eight when Ed phoned. Mix wished he

hadn't answered it because Ed would only start again on how he'd let

him down. But instead he was asking for bygones to be bygones. He

shouldn't have blown his top like that. His excuse was that he wasn't

really over his flu and still feeling under the weather.

"There's a lot of it about," Mix said, thinking of old Chawcer.

"Yeah, and it's not only that. Me and Steph are having problems getting

a mortgage."

He went on and on about this flat they were hoping to buy, calculating

their joint incomes, Steph's chances of promotion, and what would

happen if she fell pregnant.

"You'll have to see she doesn't." Mix had always found it difficult,

practically impossible, to apologize. Admitting he was wrong seemed to

him the ultimate humiliation. He couldn't say he was sorry but he had to

say something. "Feel like going for a drink?" he hazarded.

"Maybe

tonight?"

"Yeah, well, I can't tonight. Sun in Splendour at eight tomorrow? And a

word to the wise, Mix, eh? They're getting very hot under the collar about

you at head office. I just thought I'd give you a hint."

Mix nearly forgot about old Chawcer's tea in the morning. He hardly

ever drank the stuff himself, but he kept a packet of teabags next to the

coffee jar and when he saw it he remembered. He'd have to take the

sugar down too in case she took it.

She didn't. That was the first thing she said to him after he knocked

and went in. "You need not have brought that, Mr. Cellini. I don't take

sugar." Nothing about how kind of him. No "Good morning." Her voice

was weak and she kept coughing. As she struggled to sit up he could see

great wet patches on her nightdress where she had sweated. "What day is

it?"

Impatiently, he told her.

"Then it must be tomorrow that the woodworm people will be here.

They're coming to see about the woodworm in the room next to your flat.

I can't remember what their name is but it doesn't matter." Coughing

shook her. "Oh, dear, I can hardly speak. One of my friends will let them

in. I expect they'll take up the floorboards, find out what that ghastly

smell is ... "

Old clothes lay all over the bedroom. Surely she could have cleared up

the ashes in the fireplace. She hadn't always been ill. The air felt

unbreathable and enormously, palpably, hot. Flies were everywhere,

swarming in the dusty shaft of sunlight.

"Shall I open a window?"

She wasn't too ill to round on him. "Please don't unless you want me to

freeze to death. Just leave it." Cough, cough, cough ...

Chapter 16

Nerissa recognized the girl from the photograph in the paper, Kayleigh

cried when she saw it, and Abbas Reza tried to comfort her by saying

Danila would surely turn up safe and sound. Shoshana never read

newspapers. The barmaid in the Kensington Park Hotel might have

recognized her as Mix's companion, but she didn't see the photograph.

She had gone to Spain to work in a seafront bar on the Costa Blanca.

Mix had no need to see it. It was enough for him to know that

photographer another would be there. The newspaper had got it from one

of Danila's brothers, who handed it over while his stepfather was out.

Mix sat downstairs in the drawing room, studying the Yellow Pages,

though he should have been at work an hour before. There were so many

messages on his mobile that he had erased the lot without looking at

them. Ideally, he should phone all these woodworm specialists and check

which one of them was coming, but there were dozens, if not hundreds.

He'd made a tentative attempt at two of them and had had to hold on

so long, pressing this key and that, listening to piped music, that he gave

up. The only thing to do was take a day off, stay here and let the man in

himself. Or, rather, not let him in, tell him his services weren't needed. If

the Fordyce woman or the other one insisted on staying, they might have

a tussle on the doorstep. He must somehow stop that happening.

He'd have to call head office and tell them he was ill. The doctor would

come some time in the afternoon, the woodworm man at any time. This

evening he was supposed to be going for a drink with Ed. Suppose he

hadn't agreed to take oldChawcer her tea, he wouldn't have found out

about the woodwormman--the outcome didn't bear thinking of. It drove

him back into the room where Danila lay under the floorboards. The

smell in this extreme heat was worse, awful, like things rotting in the

back of a fridge someone had turned off. He felt like breaking a window

to let some of it out but he thought of the noise it would make and the

fuss it would cause.

As soon as possible he must move the body. Once the woodwormman

had been got rid of, the doctor and those women had gone, he would

move it and drag it down all fifty-two of ,those stairs. For the present, he

couldn't stay in his own flat, it was too high up, too remote. He had to be

sure he'd hear the doorbell when people came, preferably be stationed

where he could see them coming. Halfway down the tiled flight he heard

a key turn in the front door lock. Old Ma Fordyce or MaWinthrop. It was

Fordyce, the one with the long red fingernails. He heard her slowly

stumping up the stairs below him and they met outside old Chawcer's

bedroom door.

"Good morning. How are you today?"

"Fine," Mix lied.

"Did you feed the cat?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you," said Olive Fordyce. "I don't see anyone else around, do you?"

Please give the poor thing some food at once." She went into old

Chawcer's bedroom.

Talking to me as if I was her servant, thought Mix. Why shouldn't she

feed the bloody cat? He was rather afraid of Otto, who gave him almost

human stares of loathing, but he went into the kitchen and looked about

him for cans of catfood. His mother had been as messy as Chawcer, the

reason he was such a fastidious housekeeper himself, so he had a good

idea where to look. A tin decorated with a picture of a cat washing its

paws came to light in the back of a cupboard full of sprouting potatoes

and onions growing green shoots. He put half into a saucer and left it on

the floor beside a large plastic bag stuffed full of moldy loaf ends and

bread rolls.

It didn't really matter when the doctor came or if he came at all, except

that while he was there Chawcer wouldn't be able to get out of bed and

wander about. The important caller was the woodworm man. Mix pushed

a chair covered in fraying brown corduroy up close to the front window

where he could sit and keep an eye on the street. He had left his mobile

upstairs. Never mind, he could use her phone if he needed it. There Olive

Fordyce found him half an hour later.

"I don't think Gwen's any better. That cough sounds like pleurisy.

Imagine it, in this heat. What are you doing here?"

Mix made no reply. "What's the name of the firm she's got coming to see to the woodworm?"

"Are you asking me? How should I know? Ask her."

"She's forgotten."

Olive sat down. For a ministering angel with stairs to climb, she was

wearing highly unsuitable shoes, red, pointed, and with two-inch heels.

Even without looking she could feel her ankles swelling. "She wanted me

to go up into that room and see what I thought. She says there's a funny smell."

If he hadn't been sitting down, Mix thought he would have fallen. His

head swam. He managed to say, "The woodworm people will see to that."

"Well, I must say I don't really want to go up there now. My poor feet

feel bad enough as it is, it's always the same in hot weather. Gwen really ought to have a stairlift."

There was no answer to be made to this. She got up, having difficulty in

balancing. "You'll be here to let the doctor in, won't you?"

Mix wanted to shout something rude at her, but he remembered that,

improbable as it was, this woman must be Nerissa's great-aunt. "I

suppose so," he said.

With scorn, he watched her totter down the street. If these old women

knew what they looked like! It sounded as if neither she nor the other

one would be back today, and that was to his advantage. He'd be in

control of the house, who came and went. The woodworm man wouldn't

force his way in, the doctor wouldn't want to go upstairs and find out

where the smell was coming from. Hold on to that, he told himself, hold

on to that. It's only a matter of waiting.

The call came for Nerissa as she was waiting for the taxi to arrive and

take her to a shoot at the Dorchester. She had almost given up hope of

hearing from him. If a man you've met (or remet) doesn't phone you

within forty-eight hours, the chances are he won't phone at all. But the

invitation he was extending to her was so unlike any she had ever

previously received that she wondered for a moment if it was a joke.

"My parents and yours and your brother Andrew and his wife are

coming to dinner on Saturday and I wondered if you'd like to join us."

She couldn't ask him if he was serious. The temptation to say no was

quite strong but warring with it was the lure of just seeing him, being

with him, even if six others were there. She liked his parents and she

and Andrew had always been close, he being three years the elder but

still the nearest to her in age.

"Nerissa?" Darel said.

She spoke haltingly. "Yes, thank you. I'd--I'd love to."

He gave her the address, miles away in Docklands, somewhere near

Old Crane Stairs. Wapping was the station on the East London Line.

"I expect I'll drive," said Nerissa. "Excuse me, I must go, my cab's come."

What was the idea, she thought as she got into her taxi. Was he just

very old-fashioned, or was he afraid of being alone with her? He wasn't

gay, was he? Her heart seemed to beat very slowly but loudly. No, he

couldn't be. Sheila Jones had talked about some girl friend he used to

have. She considered. Perhaps she just wanted to test her, see if the way

he'd used to think about her was right or if she really had turned out to

be different, as he'd said.

A client was with Shoshana, so Kayleigh talked to the police, though she

had already told them all she knew. On that Friday Danila had worked at

the spa as usual, Kayleigh herself had spoken to her on the phone at

three-thirty, half an hour before she was due to take over from the

Bosnian girl. She had seen her, exchanged a few words, and Danila had

gone off home to Oxford Gardens. Of the other tenants in the house, one,

a man on the second floor, had seen her come in at four-thirty

orthereabouts. He had been in the hallway, sorting out his letters from

the rest of the post. Danila had said hi to him and goneoff upstairs to her

room on the first floor. Abbas Reza hadn'tseen her, though he believed he

had heard her leave the house at about seven-fifty that evening. If she

had a boyfriend he knew nothing about it and nor did Kayleigh. No one

had seen her since.

If she were dead, the police believed, her body would have been found

by this time. They considered suggestions of a secret lover. But why

should she keep a lover hidden? She had nothing to be ashamed of or

even discreet about. The only clue, and that tenuous, was that the

tenant on the second floor, a man of Chinese origin called Tony Li, had

heard Danila and a man talking to each other outside her room one

eveninga bout three weeks before she disappeared. He hadn't seen

theman, only heard his voice though not the words he spoke.

Waiting with nothing to do, no distractions, nothing to read or listen to or

look at, is the slowest of all time-wasters. After two hours of it, Mix went

upstairs and fetched Crimes of the Forties. Somehow he didn't want to

read anything these days but books about Reggie, not magazines, not

newspapers--definitely not newspapers. Coming back downstairs he

heard old Chawcer coughing her lungs up. Otto was in the hallway,

washing his face after eating the food Mix had put down. He behaved as

if no one else was there or as if this human male was so insignificant as

not to count and certainly not to be considered as interrupting his

cleaning routine.

There seemed nothing new in the book, nothing he hadn't come across

before. He knew all about Beresford Brown, an African Caribbean

immigrant and new tenant of 10 Rillington Place, taking down a partition

in the kitchen and finding two bodies pushed into an alcove. By then

Reggie was far away, though not far enough to escape eventual arrest. All

this was familiar stuff to Mix, but he read this author's version with

interest just the same, anxious for details of the process of decaying

corpses. It had been December and cold. Fifty years ago, before this

global warming, even March would have been freezing, and as for August

... Just his luck that today it was hotter than Spain, according to the

television, as hot as Dubai.

He had read about fifteen pages--there were only twenty-two on Reggie when the phone rang. To answer it or

not? Might as well. It would be something to do. A man's voice said, "Is Miss Chawcer there, please?" He sounded quite elderly. "She's not available now," Mix said, and then quickly, "You're not the woodworm people, are you?" "I'm afraid not. My name is Stephen Reeves, Dr. Reeves." This wasn't the doctor who was expected later but the man old Chawcer had been writing all those letters to. Mix said, "Oh, yes?" "Would you give her a message? Would you say I'd like to drop in and see her when I'm next in London?" He gave a phone number, which Mix said he would write down but didn't. There was no paper or pen at hand. She probably knew the number anyway, she was bound to. "I'll tell her," he said. Back to the book and the waiting. The illustrations horrified him but they drew his eyes as well. The bodies looked so squalid, like dirty bundles of rags instead of real dead people. Ethel Christie lay under the floorboards in front of the fireplace in the front room. Would Danila look like that when he lifted the boards? When someone else lifted them? Ghosts and those early fears seemed absurd, childish, now that he had real danger to worry about. The caption under another picture said Ruth Fuerst's leg bone had been driven into the ground to support a fence

post. Reggie's callousness fascinated him. Not many people, surely, would have the willpower and the nerve to use a bit of a dead human being for such a purpose. He would think of that while he was disposing of Danila's body and it would bring him strength. He would think of Reggie's coolness and his nerve.

By now he was beginning to get hungry but he didn't fancy anything out of old Chawcer's kitchen. He ran up the stairs two at a time for the first one and a half flights. After that he was so breathless he had to rest, he had to sit down on one of the treads. Staggering up the rest, he went into his flat to hear his phone ringing and he stood still, wondering whether to answer it or not. The woodworm people wouldn't phone him and nor would the doctor. Might as well leave it. He made a couple of rough sandwiches by laying pre-sliced cheese between pieces of pre-sliced bread, found a packet of crisps and a muesli bar and went back down to his post at the window.

The two women arrived at the same time. Mix saw one of them step out of a car with a "Doctor" label inside its windscreen and the other alight from a van with a woodgrain pattern all over, Woodrid printed in gold on its side. For some reason he knew plenty would call sexist, he hadn't

expected either to be a woman. The doctor was the first to reach the

doorstep, a few paces ahead of the van driver. She didn't bother much

with Mix and spoke brusquely.

"Where is she?"

"In her bedroom," he said with equal gruffness.

"And where might that be?"

"First floor. First door on the left."

The doctor had gone past him and the woodworm woman,

already had a foot over the threshold.

"We shan't need you after all," Mix said.

"You what?" She was rather pretty, neatly dressed in a brown uniform

with a W on the breast pocket.

"You're not needed. She's ill. Miss Chawcer, I mean. She's ill in bed. She

can't talk to you."

The woman stepped back outside but showed no inclination to go. "I

could still take a look. That's all I need to do for a start, take a look at the infestation."

"There isn't an infestation," Mix almost shouted. "I told you, she doesn't

want you. Not today. She's ill. Come back next week if you want. "

She was saying she didn't want, not if she was going to be spoken to

like that, when Mix shut the door in her face. After that he didn't look

out of the window again until he heard the van start up, and when he did

look out it was to see Ma Winthrop staggering up the path with carrier

bags full of shopping.

She could let herself in, he wasn't going to. And if any of that stuff she

was carrying was for old Chawcer's lunch, she could see to that too. How

Queenie "Winthrop guessed he was in the drawing room he didn't know,

but she put her head around the door. She seemed unpleasantly surprised.

"What are you doing there?"

"Letting the doctor in."

"Oh, yes, I saw her car. Isn't she a sweet woman?"

Mix didn't answer. It had suddenly come to him that he had forgotten to

phone the head office. "I'm going up to my own place now," he said. "I fed the cat."

Would she go into old Chawcer's bedroom while the doctor was there?

Even if she did, even though the woodworm woman had come and gone, it

was far too risky to attempt taking the body down all those flights of

stairs. His only chance was in the night. He would have liked to get out

into the garden and look around the place, find the best burial site, see if

there was a shed or some sort of outbuilding in which to lay the body

while he dug. Because of projecting roofs and bays, it was as impossible to

see more than the end of the garden from his flat.

Phone the head office while they were all in that bedroom, get it over.

Later on he could attempt going outside. The receptionist who answered

didn't wait for him to say who he wanted to speak to.

"Jack wants to talk to you now." Jack was Mr. Fleisch, the departmental manager. "He really wanted to talk to you like first thing

this morning. I'll put him on."

Mix scarcely had a chance to get a word in edgewise. "Arey ou ill? You

must be seriously sick to miss four home visits,seven urgent phone calls,

and three text messages. Half of west London is out gunning for you. Is it

mental or physical? I'd say mental, wouldn't you? That why sending you

to the medicdoes fuck-all for you. You are up shit creek, my lad."

"What can I say? Maybe it is mental. Maybe it's depression. I'll have to

snap out of it, I know I will."

"Too right. Spot on. Meantime, while you're doing yours napping-out,

Mr. Pearson wants to see you first thing tomorrowmornmg. "

"I'll be there," said Mix.

"You'd better."

Things must be serious if he was summoned to the chief executive's

presence. A sacking matter, or at best a last-chance matter. To hell with

it, he couldn't worry about that now. If he got the body out from under

the floor and out into the garden after dark, he would never manage to

dig a deep grave and put her in it in a single night. Anyway, he'd be fit for

nothing in the morning. He was once more in the room where she lay, nauseous from the strengthening stench but contemplating lifting the floorboard now, when he heard Queenie "Winthrop's loud, fluting voice yelling at him from the first floor.

"Mr. Cellini, Mr. Cellini, are you there? Can you hear me? Can you come down a minute?"

He'd have to or she'd come up. You could smell the smell at the top of the stairs now. "Okay, I'm coming."

He shut the door and went down the tiled flight and then the next one. Ma

"Winthrop looked flushed and excited. "Gwendolen has pneumonia. I

can't say I'm surprised. Dr. Smithers is downstairs now, phoning for an ambulance to take her to hospital."

Mix seemed to feel his heart leap in his chest. She was going away! He'd be alone in the house, maybe for a week. He had to ask.

"How long for?"

"Doctor doesn't know. A few days, certainly." She addressed him as if he

were fourteen years old. "Now you'll be responsible for the place while

she's away and we're relying on you. Don't disappoint us."

Chapter 17

Steph came too, of course. She always did. Those two were inseparable at

the moment. That would last a couple of years, Mix thought, and after

that, especially if there was a baby, Ed would start going out on his own again.

They were already in the Sun in Splendour when he arrived. He had

come very close to forgetting their arrangement and it was a quarter to

eight, while he was planning what to say and what excuses to make to

Mr. Pearson and Ed's name came into his calculations, that he

remembered. If he failed to turn up, Ed would definitely never speak to

him again. Anyway, he wouldn't mind getting out, having some fresh air

and talking to real people instead of those old women.

He ran down the stairs, feeling almost cheerful. The ambulance had

taken her away at three-thirty and Queenie Winthrop had left with it. No

need now to try going into the garden without being detected. No need to

move the body yet. He'd lain down on the sofa with his feet up and read a

Reggie book he'd had for a long time and read at least twice before, Death

in a Deckchair, coming to the part that at present interested him most,

how decay had proceeded in the bodies of those women, Ruth Fuerst,

Muriel Eady, Hectorina McClennan, Kathleen Maloney, Rita Nelson, and

the murderer's own wife, Ethel.

It wasn't the best of the Reggie books he had read. The first prize had to

go to Killer Extraordinary, but he'd finish this one chapter.
Funny, if

anyone had told him six months before that he'd find a
book, any book,

more fascinating than TV or a game online, he'd have
laughed at them.

He was still thinking about Reggie and the way he hid
those bodies, only

two of them buried in the ground, a couple of them
partially burnt, when

he walked into the pub.

Ed laughed when he saw him and said, "Late as
usual. Never mind, eh?"

Mix didn't much like that, but he decided not to argue.
Instead he

admired Steph's engagement ring and asked when they
were getting

married.

"That's a long way off," Ed said, fetching him a gin
and tonic. "Moved on

to the hard stuff, I see."

Mix thought this undeserving of a reply. He expected Ed
to ask him to

be his best man. Before their row he would have done;
maybe he still

would, if not tonight.

"You're up shit creek at head office," said Ed. "But I
expect you know

that by now."

"You're the second person to say that to me today. I don't
want to

discuss it."

"When Mr. Pearson's the third person you'll have to."

Steph giggled. But she wasn't an unkind girl and she
changed the

subject to weddings and homes and mortgages. They talked about that

for a while and then she said what was very nearly the worst thing Mix wanted to hear.

"They've been looking for that missing girl in here."

"What missing girl?" He had to pretend.

"Danila Kovic or however you pronounce it. Two policemen came in and

talked to that guy Frank, the one who's the barman. I heard them say

she'd applied for a job in here because what she was getting at some gym

wasn't enough to live on."

"She didn't get it," said Ed. "Didn't have the experience, Frank said after

they'd gone. He knew all about it, he remembered her. Poor little kid, he

called her, said she didn't look old enough to drink, let alone sell booze."

"That wasn't much use to the police," said Mix, rather relieved.

They were searching for her, but he already knew that.

Thank God he'd never brought her in here. Talk about something else.

"When's the wedding to be?"

"You asked me that already and you'll get the same answer.

Not for a long time."

"We want to get everything straight and everything paid for," said Steph,

"before we actually get married. That gives the marriage a better chance,

don't you think?"

Mix hadn't an opinion on this, but he agreed and they continued to talk

about the new flat and the mortgage and building societies and interest

rates until Ed suddenly said, "Frank said he saw her again. Walking

down Oxford Gardens with some guy."

Mix spilled some of his drink. It made a small bubbly pool. He knew he

should have said, "Saw who?" but he didn't, he knew as soon as Ed

spoke who "her" was. In rather too loud a voice he said, "Tell the police, did he?"

"He said he would. It had slipped his mind at the time he talked to them."

This was the nearest they had got to finding a man in her life. Would

this Frank be able to describe him? Would he recognize him?

"Is Frank on tonight?"

Mix fancied his voice hadn't been quite steady when he spoke and he

thought Ed looked at him strangely. "He'll be on later."

Wait, don't say you're leaving now, they'll think it a bit dodgy if you do.

He forced himself to remain in his chair, though it felt as if every nerve in

his body was straining to push him out of it and drive him through ~door.

But he stayed, sweat breaking out on his forehead.

"Have another?" Ed was tired of waiting for Mix to offer. They could sit

there all night before he did that. "Same again?"

"I've got to go," Mix said.

What did this Frank look like? He couldn't remember and he couldn't

ask. Leaving, he might easily bump into him out in Pembridge Gardens

without knowing who he was. But Frank would know him. He said an

abrupt good-bye to Steph and "See you" to Ed.

There were plenty of people about. There always were, these fine warm

nights. Any of the youngish men might be Frank. The one coming up

from Notting Hill Gate might be him or that one getting out of a car. At

any rate neither of them seemed to recognize him. Mix could get the bus

or walk, but standing at the bus stop he'd be more easily spotted, while

walking would get him away from the danger area and, besides, it was

good for him.

Usually, when he came home to St. Blaise House if it wasn't very late, a

dim light showed in two or three windows. A grayish-yellow glow lit the

glass half-moon over the front door, the drawing room casements and

perhaps one in her bedroom. Tonight there was nothing, the house looked

full of unrelieved darkness, a darkness strong enough and thick enough

to push itself against the windows from inside. Stop imagining things, he

told himself, you know it's all in your head. He unlocked the door and

went into the silence he expected and wanted.

Ghosts don't exist, there are no such things. That Shoshana would say

anything for a fast buck. Don't shut your eyes when you get to the top.

Anything you think you see is only in your mind. He kept his eyes open,

stared down the passages and saw nothing. And don't start drinking now

you're home, keep a clear head.

On the way home he had made up his mind to get the body downstairs

tonight. But why? There was no need to do it at once. Old Chawcer would

be away for a week. Leave it till tomorrow, try and get home by four and

do it then. Then you can dig the hole on Saturday in daylight. If any of

the neighbors see you digging in the night they'll be suspicious.

He'd start it all tomorrow and meanwhile have a very small gin and go

to bed. Once there, warm and comfortable, he began to worry about the

interview with Mr. Pearson in the morning. Suppose he said, "We're going

to have to let you go"? But he wouldn't, not for a few missed

appointments. Would Frank bother to tell the police? And if he did, how

could he tell who he'd seen with Danila? She might have had other

boyfriends and any of them could have been walking her back to Oxford

Gardens. He slept, woke, dozed, got up and put the light on,

contemplated his reflection in the long mirror. How would he be

described, anyway? He was just ordinary to look at, not as thin as he

ought to be, pinkish face, blunt nose, eyes vaguely gray or hazel, hair fair

going on brown. An identity parade would be another thing altogether but

even Mix in his current state of nerves could see that once again he was

letting his imagination run away with him.

Mr. Pearson wasn't going to sack him, as he had half feared, but was

giving him a last chance. He was given to delivering sententious little

lectures to his staff when they were in trouble and he gave Mix one now.

"Exemplary behavior isn't demanded of you simply on your own

account or even on mine. It is for the benefit of the whole community of

engineers in this company and for the reputation of the company itself.

Think what it means to a client at present when you speak the firm's

name on the phone. The client has a pleasant warm sensation of safety,

of reassurance and satisfaction. It will be all right. It will be done,

and promptly. No matter what the problem, this firm will solve it. And

then think what it means when an engineer repeatedly lets the client

down, fails to turn up as promised, neglects to call back. Doesn't he--or

most probably she--begin to see the company as unreliable,

untrustworthy, no longer first-class?And isn't she then likely to say to

herself, 'Maybe I should go through the Yellow Pages and find someone else'?"

In other words, thought Mix, he's saying I've let the firm down. Well, let

him. It won't happen again, anyway."

It won't happen again, Mr. Pearson."

Downstairs, in the reps' room where he had use of a desk,Mix phoned

Shoshana's Spa. Shoshana herself answered, for the temp had left and no

replacement had yet been found for Danila.

"I'll be along to look at those machines next week."

"I suppose that means next Friday evening," Shoshana said nastily.

"Not as long as that." Mix tried to put the sound of a smile into his tone.

"It had better not be." When he had put the receiver down she dialed

the code that would tell her the number he had called from. She expected

a negative result as supposedly he phoned from a mobile or else his home

number, but instead she got the London code and seven unfamiliar digits.

Thoughtfully, she made a note of them.

Mix next called Colette Gilbert-Bamber and received a torrent of abuse.

After all she'd done for him, as she put it, to be treated like some call girl

to be picked up and dropped whenever he fancied. She'd found out the

name of his company's chief executive and considered telling Mr. Pearson

what she'd almost told her husband, that Mix had tried to rape her.

"So what do you think of that?"

"I never heard such a load of bollocks." He nearly said she'd never be

raped because rape was only when the victim was unwilling, but he

thought better of it and silently put the receiver down. After that he went

into the stock room where they kept a limited number of new machines

for immediate delivery and found what he was looking for, a very large

bag in thick but transparent light blue plastic of the kind used to protect

stationary bikes and treadmills.

This packed safely in the boot of the car, he drove from client to client,

enduring their reproaches and promising prompt follow-up visits. At two,

with a Pret-a-Manger sandwich and a can of Coke (the diet kind because

he was slimming), he gave himself the treat of a sojourn outside Nerissa's

house.

It was his first visit for days but, though he stayed for over an hour, she

didn't appear. Once he'd dealt with that body he'd have to make himself

a new strategy, a real campaign plan, for at present, as he reminded

himself, he'd only spoken to her on one single occasion since meeting her

at Colette's. Just after three-thirty he made a last call, this time at a big

place facing Holland Park, and by four-fifteen, carrying the plastic bag,

he was in St. Blaise House.

So was Queenie "Winthrop, though he didn't know it until he had been

all the way upstairs and into his flat and down again to check that he'd

be able to get the body into the garden by way of the kitchen and the two

poky little rooms beyond it. She was in the kitchen, an apron over her red

floral dress, tidying up and wiping down surfaces.

"Did you remember to feed the cat?" she said.

"I'll do it now."

Ma "Winthrop spoke in the triumphant tone of someone who has

accomplished a challenging task with finesse and expects to be

congratulated. "Don't trouble. I have done it myself," she said and added

"Though I must say he didn't seem hungry."

Mix said nothing. How long was she going to be here? She answered

him, though he hadn't asked. "I shall be at it for another couple of

hours. I've tidied up the boot room and the washhouse and now I've

started on the kitchen. What a gloryhole this place is!"

The word she used for one of those little back rooms made him start.

"Washhouse? Is there one?"

"Out here. Look."

He followed her into a room that was more like a shed with walls of

unplastered brick. A bulging thing like some sort of ancient oven filled

one corner.

"What's that?"

"It's a copper. I don't suppose you've ever seen anything like it before,

have you? My mother had one and did her washing in it. Ghastly. Women

used a dolly and a washboard. Frightfully bad for their insides."

Mix registered this as best he could. The words "dolly" and "washboard"

meant nothing but "washhouse" did. Christie had put each body in the

one at 10 Rillington Place while they awaited burial. He'd do the same

thing here if only that bloody woman would go. He should have had the

sense to get the key back. Yesterday, while she was talking about him

feeding the cat he should have asked for the key. But if she said no?

"I'd better have Miss Chawcer's key off you."

"Oh, why?" she said, returning to the kitchen and vigorously spraying

scented blue cleanser all over the sink. "I told Gwendolen I'd hang on to

it. I may need to be in and out. I'll certainly keep it if you don't mind.

Olive and I may decide to spring-clean the whole place as a surprise for

her when she comes back. Poor Gwendolen is no housekeeper, I'm afraid."

There was no more to be said. He went back to his flat, wondering if

she'd been up on this top floor. If she had she'd have smelled the smell

and wouldn't she have said something to him? It was no good sitting

down, trying to watch TV or even read the Christie book. He'd have to do

something, make the preliminary moves. Cautiously, carrying his toolbag

and the plastic bag, he went out onto the landing and listened. There

was no sound from down there. He opened the door to the bedroom next

door. He'd brought a scarf with him and this he tied round his head,

covering his nose. The smell was still there, though muffled. It worsened

beyond belief when he'd got the floorboards up but he told himself he

had to get on with it, keep on, don't think about it, breathe through your mouth.

It looked just as it had when he put it in there, small, slight, wrapped in

its shroud of red sheets. In order to lift it out he had to get his head and

face very near it and twice he gagged. But he succeeded in lifting it onto

the floor. If it hadn't changed in appearance it seemed to have gained in

weight. Lying where it had been, on the dusty joists, was the thong,

scarlet and black, a frivolous thing of elastic and lace. How had he failed

to notice its absence when he dumped the rest of her clothes? He picked

it up and put it in his pocket. The easiest part was getting her body into

the bag. When it was inside he felt better and once the mouth of the bag

was fastened with a length of wire wound round it, a huge relief came.

Suppose that old woman was waiting outside the door or coming up the

tile stairs? She wasn't and he managed to drag the bag and body into

his own flat. Once he had it inside he had to go back, replace the

floorboards and check on that smell. If any of it still lingered.

Of course it did. Far less powerful but bad enough. Perhaps it would be

better once he'd got the boards back. He couldn't tell if it was or not but

time would surely fade it. On his way, home he should have picked up

another bottle of gin. Very little of what he'd had was left. Probably just

as well. He drank it, waiting for Queenie "Winthrop to leave.

She finally did at half-past six. From his bedroom window Mix watched

her go. He should have asked when she'd be back again, though asking

might look strange. While he was in the house but of course not when he

was out of it, he could bolt the front door top and bottom, and that was

what he'd do while he took the body down. A procrastinator, he would

never normally have said there was no time like the present but he said

it now. First he went down and bolted the front door. That was nearly as

good as having the key back. Going up and down these stairs must be

doing him good even if it didn't feel like it. Remembering to take his keys

with him, he pulled the body out of his flat and to the top of the stairs,

kicking the door shut behind him.

If she had been any heavier he doubted that he could have done it. On

the first-floor landing he encountered Otto, mewing at old Chawcer's

bedroom door. Mix didn't know why he opened the door to let him in but

he did. Perhaps it was just for the sake of having a rest from lugging this

heavy bag down. When he got to the bottom he thought he couldn't take it

another step but he braced himself to drag it along the passage toward

the breakfast room and kitchen. He had almost reached the breakfast

room door when he heard the grating sound of a key turning in the front

door. He froze but his heart raced. The door was bolted, no one could get

in, he didn't have to worry.

The key turned again, the letterbox flapped open and Olive Fordyce's

voice called out, "Mr. Cellini, Mr. Cellini, are you there?"

He was almost afraid to breathe. She called him again, then, "Let me in!"

What are you doing, bolting the door? Mr. Cellini!"

Hours seemed to pass as she shouted, tried the door again, rang the

bell, flapped the letterbox. It was no more than three minutes as he

discovered, looking at his watch once he heard her feet clacking down the path toward the gate. It had frightened him too much for him to think of digging now. He felt weak and almost faint. But he summoned up the strength to drag the plastic-wrapped bundle through the kitchen into the place called the washhouse. The huge old copper dominated one corner of the room, an excrescence of bricks and mortar about four feet high with a wooden lid at the top. Lifting the lid disclosed an earthenware tub, quite dry and evidently unused for years. He lifted the body, puffing and gasping, and placing his hand on his lower back felt a bulge in his pocket. It was the thong. Before closing the lid he dropped it inside. He'd retrieve it later and bury it with the body. No one, certainly not one of those nosy old women, would have reason to look inside the copper. Old Chawcer had a usable if antiquated washing machine, an advance, in spite of its shortcomings, on this antique. Going into the garden felt restful, almost restorative. The heat of the day had given place to a mild still evening. The unmown grass was the color of blond hair and dry as a hayfield. In the garden beyond the rear wall the Indian man was trying to cut his lawn with an old hand mower

and making little impression on it. The guinea fowl padded about and clucked.

There wasn't a bare piece of ground where digging would be easy. Every

inch was overgrown with grass and weeds. Mix had never in his whole

life dug into soil of any kind and this, what he could see of it between

sturdy thrusting thistles and aggressive things he didn't know the name

of, looked as heavy as concrete but a muddy yellow color. Inside the

semiderelict shed he found rusty tools: a spade, a fork, a pick. Tomorrow

he'd do it and that would be the end.

Tell yourself that, he whispered, tell yourself that by the time it's done

all the worry will be over. He went into the house and drew back the

bolts, top and bottom. Old Chawcer made no noise when she was at

home. Reading is a silent occupation. Yet the house seemed quieter

without her. An oppressive silence filled its spaces. His shoes were dusty

from his exploration of the garden. Unwilling to leave behind any evidence

of his visit to a place where he shouldn't have been, he took them off and

carried them up the stairs, thinking of the task awaiting him on the next

day. Perhaps he should have tried the soil to see how hard it was and

how heavy. But what would be the use of that? He would have to do it,

however difficult the job. A final visit should be paid to the bedroom

where she had lain. It would cheer him up if the smell was fading and

everything in there returned to normal.

He reached the top and opened the door. "Whether the smell had gone

he never knew, he was in there too short a time to tell. The ghost stood in

the middle of the room under the gas lamp, gazing down at the

floorboards below which had been Danila's resting place. Mix fled. He

scrabbled at his front door, his hand shaking and rattling the key against

the woodwork. Gibbering sobs rose in his throat. He wanted somewhere

safe to hide and there was nowhere if he couldn't get inside. The key

shook in the lock, stuck, came out. He managed to push it in again and

the door opened. He fell onto the floor and kicked the door shut behind

him, his eyes squeezed shut and his hands drumming on the carpet.

Shoshana had been right. After a moment or two he had recovered

enough to feel for the cross in his pocket, but by then it was too late to

use it.

Chapter 18

"She was only a kid," said Frank McQuaid.

He had heard this phrase many times in detective series on television

and always hoped for the chance to use it. The policeman interviewing

him said, "Yes? And you saw her walking along Oxford Gardens with a

man. Can you describe him?"

"Just ordinary," said Frank who might have been reading from a script.

Sitting opposite the detective sergeant in a room behind the bar, he

assumed a grave and thoughtful expression as if millions were watching

him. "Nondescript--know what I mean? Brownish hair, brownish eyes, I

reckon. It was dark."

"It's never dark in London."

Frank considered this statement. It had an originality about it that

made him suspicious. He decided to ignore it. "Middleheight or a bit lessknow what I mean?"

"I suppose you mean a bit below middle height, Mr.McQuaid."

"Thats what I said. She was just a kid." Frank looked mournfully at an

invisible camera. "Came from some foreign place. Albania? Maybe she

was an asylum seeker."

"Yes, thank you, Mr. McQuaid. You've been" the policeman lied, "very

helpful."

* * *

That night there was a storm at sea. That was what it soundedlike, the

waves pounding on the shore. Why the Westwaysould have been so

much louder than usual Mix didn't know. Perhaps the wind was coming

from a different direction. He should have asked that doctor for sleeping

pills. As it was, he had no sleep until about four when he fell into a

troubled doze. The brightness of the morning did something to reduce his

terror to simple fear when he awoke at eight. His first thought was that

he must move out, get away from this haunted house, his second that

moving was impossible while that body remained downstairs in the

washhouse. What he had seen the evening before so concentrated his

mind that he barely reacted when he went downstairs and picked up from

the doormat the letter from the blood-testing lab via the company's doctor

and saw that his cholesterol level at 8.8 was alarmingly high. So what?

He could get pills for it, statins or something. How would he dare go

upstairs when he came home from work?

Mix knew he couldn't miss any more calls or leave one other message

unanswered. Colette Gilbert-Bamber was lost, but he had no regrets

about her. Reluctant as he was to go near the place, he drove over to

Westbourne Grove and Shoshana's Spa. It was ten o'clock in the

morning.

He rang the bell and an unknown voice answered in an affected drawl of

the kind he called "Sloaney." "Mix Cellini to repair the equipment," he

said.

No reply but the door growled ajar. He walked in, lifted his head and

came face to face with Nerissa descending the stairs. For a moment he

thought he must be hallucinating, he couldn't believe his luck. It was as

if fate was compensating him for his terrible experience of last evening.

He found a voice that came out rather shrilly.

"Good morning, Miss Nash."

She looked at him without smiling. "Hi," she said and she sounded

frightened.

"Please don't be nervous," he said. "It's just--just that I'm always happy

to see you."

She looked very beautiful--she couldn't help that--in jeans and a cotton

top with a red poncho over it. Halfway down the stairs, she had stopped

and stood there, as if a bit scared to pass him. "Did you follow me here?"

"Oh, no," he said in a tone intended to reassure. "No, no, no. I work

here, servicing the equipment." He walked away from the foot of the

stairs and waited by the lift. "Please come down. I won't harm you."

That old bitch of a mother of hers and the great-aunt too must have

been working on her, turning her against him. He'd like to kill that old

Fordyce woman. Nerissa came slowly down the stairs, hesitated at the

foot before saying, "Well, good-bye. Please don't ... " She had slipped out

of the door before ending her sentence.

She was going to say, please don't think me rude, I didn't understand,

Mix thought. Or, please don't think I meant you'd harm me. Something

like that. She was as nice as she was beautiful, kind and sweet. It would

be her nasty old mother who'd taught her to ask him if he was following

her, not the kind of thing she'd say naturally. Mothers could be their

children's enemies. Look at his own, marrying Javy and, after he'd

gone, bringing all those men back when she'd got three growing kids at

home, learning her loose behavior. Nerissa's mum ought to be thankful

her daughter had someone to adore her and, more than that, respect her

in an old-fashioned way.

By this time the lift had taken him up to the spa floor. Where Danila

had presided the first time he came there stood a woman almost as

gorgeous as Nerissa, though an arctic blonde where she was dark, snowwhite skin, a glacier-pale torrent of hair, long fingers tipped in silver. She

must be the one who had answered his ring. "I'll just let Madam

Shoshana know you're here," she said in a debutante's voice.

Mix would very much rather she didn't. The chances were he was crazy old

soothsayer wouldn't remember him from the session in that upstairs

room, but she might. And if she did, would she think it funny him also

being the one she had a service contract with? Did that matter? Mix

would prefer no one to find anything funny about his behavior. He didn't

want attention drawn to himself. Anyway, she wouldn't come up herself,

she'd send a message by this amazing-looking girl. Once more he gazed at her.

In the tones of Eliza Doolittle after her transformation, she said, "Whom

do you think you're looking at?"

Mix walked a few paces away. "Which machines want seeing to?"

"Madam will show you. I'm new here."

Before he could answer, Shoshana came out of the lift, draped in black

robes, hung with ropes of jet and looking like a female druid in

mourning. Mix knew by her eyes that she recognized him before she

spoke and when she did it was in a completely different voice from the

one he had heard predicting his future, a shrill, sharp north London tone.

"You've taken your time about coming. If reading the cards means more

to you than work, you're not going to get very far. The ones you've got to

mend are two bikes, four and seven. Right?"

"Right," said Mix through gritted teeth.

He had to stop his mouth falling open when she said, "You fancied that

girl who worked here. The skinny little one that left without a word.

Didn't run off with you, did she?"

Mix managed a derisive smile. It was one of the hardest things he'd ever

achieved. "What, me? I hardly knew her."

"That's what you men always say. I don't like men. Now you'd better get

on with what you've come about."

What an old horror! He'd never come across a female of her age quite so

horrible. She put Chawcer, Fordyce, and "Winthrop in the shade. He

shuddered and turned his attention to the two stationary bicycles. Both

needed a new part but different parts in each case. He didn't carry

spares with him and, since he was working freelance at Shoshana's, if he

was to get them he'd have to pinch them from the warehouse. Nothing to

be done now. He told the icy beauty he'd order the necessary parts

and come back when he'd got them.

"When will that be?"

"A few days? Not more than a week."

"It had better not be. Madam will do her nut if you keep her waiting any

longer."

He had more calls to make. One was a new customer who had never

sent for him before and wanted to order a skier. She lived in a place called

St. Catherine's Mews on the border of Knightsbridge and Chelsea, but

though he drove twice up and down Milner Street he couldn't find it.

Leave it, he said to himself, call her and ask her for directions. One of the

few men who kept exercise equipment in his home had sent for him to

Lady Somerset Road in Kentish Town but when he got there, perilously

parked and afraid of being clamped, Mr. Holland-Bridgeman wasn't at

home. Mix decided to go back briefly to St. Blaise House and check on

that copper in the washhouse.

Approaching from Oxford Gardens, he wondered what he'd do if police

cars were outside and policemen pacing about and blue and white crime

tape stretched across the front garden. Turn around and hide

somewhere, he thought, maybe go up north and home but not to his

mother, who'd either have some new lover living with her or be back in

the bin. His brother? They'd never got on well. Shannon was the only one

in the family he'd had any sort of relationship with ... St. Blaise Avenue

was empty of people, relatively silent, the usual cars parked nose to tail

along both sides. One space was left for Mix. He let himself into the

house and stood listening, prepared for Ma Fordyce or Ma "Winthrop to

appear from the kitchen regions, waving a duster.

Unconvinced one or other of them wasn't in the house, he walked

carefully through the breakfast room to the kitchen, a transformed place

since cleaning operations conducted by those two, and in the

washhouse. He sniffed, waited, sniffed again. No smell. His wrapping had

been effective. Maybe Christie had also dealt with that particular problem

in the same way-did they have plastic all that time ago? He found himself

reluctant to lift the lid off the copper but he did it. There was no point in

coming home at all at this hour and not doing that. The well-sealed, wellwrapped package she and the bag made was just as he had left it and,

even with the lid up, he could smell nothing at all.

Then Mix made another discovery. If you didn't know what the package

in the copper was you'd think it was just a big plastic sack full of old

clothes someone had stuffed in there for a place to put it. You wouldn't

investigate any further. If it didn't smell and looked like the kind of bag

people took to a launderette, wasn't it perfectly safe where it was? The

situation was quite different for that man Beresford Brown, who began

putting up brackets for a radio, and behind a partition in Rillington Place

found a woman's naked body. There was no smell because it was

midwinter and cold. In his own case there'd be no smell because of the

way he'd wrapped it. Why shouldn't it stay where it was? The idea seemed

too daring and bold to be feasible, but why not? Wouldn't he worry about

it all the time it was there?

Old Chawcer was no careful housewife. You could see that from the way

Fordyce and Winthrop had had to work to get the place straight. She'd

never go near that copper, she had a washing machine, and though it was

old-fashioned it was still usable. In the unlikely event of her looking

inside the copper, all she'd see was old clothes in a plastic bag. So why

not leave it there? Mix closed the lid, wandered slowly back into

the kitchen, thinking of this new and simpler plan, and came face to face

with Olive Fordyce. Because of his stealthy entry he had the satisfaction

of making her jump, as the ghost had made him, though he had been as

alarmed as she and with more cause. She had a small white dog with her,

about half the size of Otto.

"What are you doing out there?"

"I was in the hallway," Mix said, "and I heard a noise."

"What noise?" She was very sharp with him.

"I don't know. That's why I went to see."

The look she gave him was suspicious and searching.

"Where's the cat?"

"How should I know? I haven't seen him for days."

The dog began sniffing the hems of his jeans. "He'll run away if you don't

feed him and find someone who will. Don't do that, Kylie, there's a good

girl. You'll be pleased," she said, pausing, "to hear Gwen will be home in a day or two."

She gave him a broad malicious smile. It was as if she knew what was

going on in his head. He held on to the edge of the newly cleaned

counter, afraid he might fall. All ideas of leaving the body where it was

vanished and to get it out of the house, out of any possible sighting,

became imperative.

"Naturally, I've been into the hospital to see her, as I always do every

morning, and that's what she told me. The sister confirmed it. Tomorrow,

she said." She picked up the dog and cuddled it like a child with a toy. "If

not it'll be the day after. They don't keep patients in like they used to.

Well, nothing's like it, used to be, is it?"

He said nothing. He was aware of what she would have expected him to

say-if he were a "nice young man" that is. "It'll be good to have her back,"

for instance, or, "She'll be pleased to have her kitchen all neat and tidy."

He couldn't find the words, any words.

"I'm going out again now to do a bit of shopping for her. She'll need a

good deal of looking after." She fluttered her free hand and he saw her

nails were orchid pink today, like a young girl, pointed and glossy and

sharp. With no inhibitions about looking someone straight in the eye and

holding the gaze, she fixed him with a penetrating gaze,
at the same time

craning her neck forward and holding her head slightly
on one side.

"You'll have to pull your socks up, make her cups of tea,
and fetch her

bits and pieces. That won't do you any harm. She won't
be able to get

about much yet."

"When are you coming back?" he said.

"What, today? I don't know. When I've done the
shopping. Does it

bother you?"

"Give me the list and I'll do the shopping," he said.

It was evidently the best thing he could have said. For
the first time

since they had encountered each other in the
kitchen doorway, she

spoke pleasantly to him. "That's very good of you. I won't
say no. It'll save

my legs. I'll give you some money."

She began rummaging in her bag, found the list, and
handed it to him.

"You can give me the money after I've done it," he said,
mollifying her

further.

"It'll have to be a couple of days, then. I'm not coming
in again till then

if I can help it. Queenie's taking over, she'll be
in tomorrow, so I'll pass the

key on to her. Now say good-bye to Kylie."

The hell he would. Hadn't he done enough for her,
offering to do the

shopping? The two afternoon calls he was due to make,
the expenses

form to fill in, the meeting with Jack Fleisch, the other engineers, and

the reps went out of his head. Or, rather, were dismissed as of no

importance compared with the urgency of hiding that body, not

temporarily, not as an interim move, but forever.

He need not go upstairs, not now, not till later. He'd have a drink in a

pub or bar somewhere so that he could face going up there, have the

strength to face what might be at the top.

A principle of Shoshana's was: never bother the police unless they bother

you. She sat up in the soothsaying room above the spa, a client due in

ten minutes, thinking about Danila Kovic, not with any anxiety as to her

whereabouts nor fear that she might be dead, not with any sympathy for

her friends or relations who could be missing her, not with any regrets

that she no longer worked at the spa now that she had beautiful efficient

Julia, but entirely from the point of mischief-making.

The idea had never crossed her mind that Mix Cellini might have made

away with Danila. Why should he? As far as Shoshana knew, the two

had been acquainted for perhaps two or three weeks and might never

have gone out together. But a deep resentment of Mix was curdling and

fermenting and bubbling inside her. The contract he had signed meant

nothing to him; once Danila had disappeared he never came near the

place. As for repairing equipment, he had told her he'd ordered those

parts for the bicycles but she'd be a fool to believe him. He was putting

her through the time-consuming process of finding new engineers, as if

she hadn't had enough difficulties getting a replacement for Danila.

Until that morning, she had believed that her hope of retaliation lay in

the number she had noted down when he called her and she found he

wasn't on his mobile. She more than suspected that he worked for a

company that had a rule forbidding operatives to engage in outside work.

A call to a chief executive, or managing director, whatever you liked to

call it, might well lose him his job. This was the revenge she was saving

up unless his behavior changed radically. But might not a fitter

retribution be to tell the police he was Danila's elusive boyfriend?

She didn't want them coming to the spa. There were things she would

prefer them not to see--that security arrangements were far from

adequate, that there was no fire escape from any of the upper floors, and

no safety measures were in place. But she could go to them. Perhaps

there was no great hurry. Do nothing on impulse, was another of her

rules. Think it through. She began taking the pieces of quartz and lapis

and jade from their velvet bag and examining the cards to make sure they

were suitably arranged.

The client, a new one, very young and obviously overawed by the room,

its ambience, and by Madam Shoshana herself, tapped on the door and

came in rather fearfully. She crept to the chair that was waiting for her

and lifted her eyes to the soothsayer's half-veiled face.

"Place your hands on the mandala within the stones, breathe deeply and

I will begin," said Shoshana in the mystical and occult voice she kept for

forecasting the future.

Half a liter of milk, 200 grams of butter, cheese, sliced bread, a lamb chop

and a chicken breast, frozen peas, a carton of soup, and a great deal

more. Mix put it away in the now wholesome and inviting fridge. He had

done old Chawcer's shopping mechanically, buying what was on the list

but still hardly noticing what he bought, losing the supermarket receipt

so he had no idea what accounts to render to Ma Fordyce. A couple of

gins in KPH had given him courage and a photograph in the Evening

Standard of Nerissa modeling an Alexander McQueen gown cheered him

up. She'd wear something like that at their wedding and carry a huge

bouquet of white orchids.

Ma Fordyce wouldn't come back that afternoon and MaWinthrop wasn't

due till some time tomorrow. It was half-pasttwo. He mustn't wait till

tomorrow, he must get started now. He forced himself to go upstairs,

glad of the bright sunlight penetrating the Isabella window. Because a

little breeze wasblowing, the colors danced like strobe lights. Nothing

there.Everything quiet andstill-and unoccupied. He sighed and let

himself in. Mix had no shoes suitable for heavy digging but he put on his

thick-soled trainers and a pair of old jeans. A faint smell still hung about

his flat and it was stronger in the roomwhere she had been under the

floorboards. That would fade in time. He bolted the front door top and

bottom just in case Ma Winthrop decided to look in, and went outside

into the garden.

The weather was still what people called glorious. He wouldrather it had

been cold and gray, for this warmth and sunshine brought the neighbors

out into their gardens. The people who kept theirs perfect were having a

drink at a white metal tableunder a striped umbrella. Some of them

could easily see whathe was doing from where they sat. He took the

spade and fork from the shed and found a place where the soil showing

between the sturdy weeds looked softer than the rock-hard clayey areas.

Digging was unskilled labor, so anyone could do it, he'd probably find it a

breeze. But at first the spade simply refused to go in. By making an

extreme effort he could just penetrate the top layer of earth down to

about two inches. After that it might as well be rock he was encountering,

it was so hard and apparently impenetrable. The pick might be the

answer, though he was as wary of using it as he would be of plying a

scythe. He fetched it from the shed, noticing with more misgivings that it

was corroded, eaten into with rust. A patch of rot showed on its handle.

He tried to swing the pick the way he had seen laborers in the road do it

but after three failed attempts was afraid of doing himself an injury. It

came as a surprise to him that you had to be fitter than he was to use an

instrument like this. Maybe he had been wrong about the quality of the

soil here. He moved farther away from the wall and nearer to the house,

taking the pick and fork with him, his shoulders already stiffening. From

here he could see over the end wall into the garden beyond where,

instead of the guinea fowl, two large Canada geese strutted among the

weeds. In deckchairs, a man in a turban and a woman in a sari sat

reading, he the evening paper, she a magazine. Though he could see

them he couldn't tell if they could see him. Perhaps it wouldn't matter.

The deckchairs were the first he had seen since the one his grandma had

sat in when he was a small boy. But instead of her and her peculiarities,

theybrought to mind Reggie who had furnished his kitchen with such

makeshift chairs after selling his furniture.

Once more he began to dig, but this time using the fork. That was

better. Its prongs were sharp enough to push through the top layer and

gradually he developed a technique of digging the fork in perpendicularly

instead of at an angle and this was more effective. He even learned how

to thrust his tool in lower down and attack the harder level of ground. He

had to. Though despairing of digging down six feet, which he'd heard was

the depth a grave should be, he knew he'd have to manage at least four.

After about an hour he rested. The front of his T-shirt was wet with

sweat. A drink of something was what he needed, even tea, but he was

afraid that if he went indoors he might not bring himself to come out

again. A rather optimistic idea that perseverance might get his muscles

used to the work so that they would stop hurting hadn't been justified.

When he straightened up a burning pain ran down his back and his right

thigh. His shoulders wanted to tense and bunch themselves around his

neck. As he tried circling them in a clockwise and then a counterclockwise direction, turning his head from left to right and left

again, he saw Otto watching him from his customary seat on the

opposite wall. The cat was as still as a carving in a museum, its round

green eyes fixed on him, its face composed into its usual expression of

malevolent scorn. The Asian couple had gone indoors, leaving their

deckchairs behind.

Mix began digging deeper with the fork but he had started to understand

he would have to use the spade, however difficult this might be. He went

back to where he had left it and, picking it up, saw something he hadn't

noticed before, a heap of gray and black speckled feathers. No doubt it

was his imagination that made him see smug satisfaction in the cat's face

when he glanced at him again. Still, look what happened before when he

called something his imagination.

Using the spade was heavy work. Each spadeful he dislodged brought

sharp needles digging into the small of his back. You've got to, you've got

to, you've no choice, he muttered to himself as he kept on. He saw that

blisters were coming up on the palms of his hands. Still, he must do at least half an hour more.

The sun still blazed down, though it was nearly six. A sharp cackle

which sounded as if uttered in his ear made him jump. He looked up,

afraid it was human, and saw the man in the turban throwing handfuls

of corn down for the geese. They jostled and shoved each other, making

their harsh cries. To his surprise, the Asian man waved cheerfully at

him, so he had to wave back. He dug for another ten minutes and knew

he'd have to give up for the day. Back again in the morning. Not bad,

anyway. He must have dug down a foot.

The tools put away, he returned by way of the washhouse where he

checked on the copper and its contents. He dragged himself up the

stairs, clinging to the banisters, pausing often. Again, he reminded

himself, he'd forgotten to feed the cat. Still, it looked as if it ate well

enough when left to its own devices. How had Reggie, years older than he

was, managed to dig those graves in his garden? From the pictures he'd

seen, it looked as neglected and overgrown as this one, the soil as

unyielding. Of course, he'd claimed to have a bad back, the reason he'd

given at the trial of Timothy Evans for being incapable of moving Beryl

Evans's body. Perhaps his gravedigging had done him a permanent injury.

Mix hardly knew how he'd managed to get up the tiled flight. Pain

dispelled all thoughts of the ghost. He staggered into his flat, poured

himself a stiff gin and tonic and fell down on the sofa. Half an hour later

he picked up the remote and put the television on, closing his eyes and

falling immediately asleep in spite of the rock music pounding out of the set.

A louder noise woke him. The front doorbell was ringing, and someone

was clattering the letterbox and hammering on the front door with their

fists. Mix crept to his door and came out onto the landing at the top of the

tiled flight. His first thought was that it was the police. The Asian man

had told them someone was digging a grave in Miss Chawcer's garden

and they had come to check. They had targets to meet these days and

they'd jump at the chance of discovering a crime. Mix couldn't see the

front garden or the street from his flat. He went down a flight, then

another, into old Chawcer's bedroom and looked out of the window.

By now it was getting dark. By the light of street lamps he saw there

were no police cars, none of that crime tape he had so much feared

earlier. Abruptly the noise ceased. A beam of light appeared on the path,

followed by Queenie Winthrop holding a flashlight in her hand. Mix

ducked down as she turned round and looked up at the windows.

Checking up on him, he supposed, making sure he'd done the shopping.

Well, she'd have to remain in ignorance. He wasn't unbolting that front

door for anyone or anything until he'd completed the burial. He began

the weary climb back.

Last night he had seen the ghost up there, in that bedroom, really seen

it. There was no longer any question of its existing only in his

imagination. Steph and Shoshana were right. It wasn't just that he had

been in a bad nervous state, the stresses of the job had got to him, all

the pressures of Ed, his worryover and longing for Nerissa, childhood

memories. He had really seen the ghost.

Chapter 19

The pain in his back kept Mix awake. If he hadn't been so frightened of

Christie's ghost he'd have gone down to old Chawcer's bathroom and

looked to see if she had any sleeping pills. She was bound to, those old

women always did. But the thought of opening his front door and seeing

that sharpfeaturedt hough blank face, those eyes behind the glasses

staring at him, was a dreadful deterrent. He took painkillers instead, the

500 milligram ones the pharmacist said were the strongest you could

buy over the counter. They weren't strong enough and the burning and

stabbing went on. The last time he had known pain like this was when

Javy had beaten him up after what he said he'd tried to do to Shannon.

At five in the morning, after a cup of coffee and a bit of toast, he made

himself start again. It was beginning to get light, the sky red and gray

with sunrise, a white frost on the grass but not enough to harden the

ground further. There was nothing, he had discovered, like knowing

you've got to do something, you've no choice, to make you get on and do

it. They surely couldn't bring old Chawcer back home before midday,

could they? At any rate, they couldn't get in if they did. He already knew

he was physically incapable of digging to a depth of six feet-inches more

than his own height. It was impossible. Four feet would be enough, it

would have to be enough.

The geese had been shut up for the night but now, when the Indian

man in turban and camel hair dressing-gown opened their door, they

came out, cackling. Mix had seen or read somewhere that geese make

good watchdogs. He didn't want them watching him. Otto was nowhere

to be seen. He dug on, accepting the pain, knowing he must, but still

wondering from time to time if he was permanently injuring his back, if

he was making himself an invalid for life. Again he asked himself how

Reggie had done it, how, come to that, he had stayed so calm and steady,

nerveless, when surprised by people arriving, by questioners, by his own

wife. Maybe he was mad and I'm not, Mix thought. Or maybe I'm mad

and he was sane, a brave strong man. At almost ten, he lifted out the last

spadeful of earth and sat down on the cold damp stony ground to rest.

"I wish to go home," said Gwendolen. "Now."

"I suppose I could get you a taxi."

Queenie Winthrop had been told by the ward sister that an ambulance

would take Gwendolen home at four o'clock that afternoon. "At the earliest."

"Taxis are a wicked price," said Gwendolen. "They cost more at weekends."

"I'll pay for it."

Gwendolen gave the humorless little laugh that was characteristic of

her but which no one had heard for the past few days. "I've never taken

charity from anyone and I'm not going to start now. Surely you know

someone with a car."

"Olive used to drive, but she's let her license lapse."

"Yes, very useful. What about her niece, Mrs. some-African-name?"

"Oh, I couldn't ask her, Gwendolen."

"Why on earth not? She can only say no, but she'll be very rude if she does."

Hazel Akwaa and her daughter were drinking coffee in Hazel's house in

Acton. Or, rather, Hazel was drinking coffee and Nerissa was drinking

sparkling water with ice and a slice of lemon. Before the phone rang they

had been discussing what Hazel was to wear to dinner at Darel Jones's

that evening, and Nerissa was offering to lend her the only garment she

possessed

that

her

mother

could

get

into,

a

heavy

silk

embroidered caftan.

"Fetch Gwendolen Chawcer from the hospital?" Nerissa heard her

mother say. "I couldn't before late this afternoon.

My husband's got the car."

"Tell her I'll drive her," said Nerissa.

So they went to Paddington together, the caftan fetched from Campden

Hill Square and hanging in a garment bag across the backseat. Even

Gwendolen could melt when confronted by true kindness and when she

realized what was being done to save her from staying longer than she

needed in hospital, she was very gracious to Nerissa. For once, in the

company of a young woman, she refrained from remarking on the

tightness of her jeans, the color and length of her fingernails, the

decolletage of her shirt, and the height of her heels, but smiled and said

how very thoughtful Nerissa was in giving up her Saturday morning to

"transport an ancient creature like me."

They reached St. Blaise House at exactly noon. Queenie Winthrop, who

hadn't been invited to accompany them but had done so just the same,

gave Gwendolen a very acerbic account, lasting for the entire journey, of

how she had tried to get into the house to make final preparations for its

owner's return."

I had a key of course. Extraordinary as it seems, I found the front door

bolted against me. Yes, bolted. You wouldn't believe it, would you?

Perhaps that Mr. Cellini is nervous of being in the place alone. I'm sure I

don't know but it was bolted top and bottom. I rang and rang and banged

on the door and the letterbox. When it was all to no avail I looked up and

caught a glimpse of him diving down out of sight: And which window do

you think he was at, Gwendolen? The one that faces the street in the

middle on the first floor. Your bedroom window. I'm almost positive.

What do you think of that?"

"I might think something if you were absolutely positive. But you're not, are you?"

Queenie didn't answer. Gwendolen was a bit much sometimes. Looking

cool and offended, she helped her out of the car, but she wasn't

surprised when Gwendolen shook off her arm as they approached the

front door and inserted her key in the lock. In spite of treating Queenie's

account of Mix Cellini's behavior with derision, she had quite expected to

find her own front door bolted against her and, as the key turned, she

was thinking of the vituperative invective she would direct against him,

culminating in notice to quit. But the door slid open easily.

They all went in and took off their jackets. As they walked across the

hallway toward the drawing room door, Mix came out from the direction

of the kitchen. He was very disconcerted to see them so early, and both

overjoyed and alarmed to see Nerissa, though he had completed his task

half an hour before and had been back only to check that he had left no

incriminating evidence behind. It was the sight of Nerissa that brought

him to a standstill in front of Gwendolen. But for her, he would have

made some perfunctory greeting, passed them and struggled upstairs,

hand pressed to aching back. He was about to ignore the rest of them

and find the most gracious words he could think of for Nerissa

when Gwendolen spoke.

"What have you been doing in my kitchen?"

Mix had been using lies and subterfuge to get him out of trouble almost

since he was a baby and he always had some defensive excuse ready. "I

knew you'd be coming home today. I thought I'd make you a cup of tea so

I went to check on the kettle and the teacups."

"Very thoughtful," said Gwendolen who didn't believe him.

"One of my friends will do that."

This was dismissal and Mix recognized it as such. He had to speak to

Nerissa before he went back upstairs. She was looking at him, smiling a

half-smile. "That was a great shot of you in last night's Standard, Miss

Nash," he said. "You wouldn't have a copy you could sign and let me

have, would you?" "It was a press photo," she said and her voice

sounded smaller than it had before. "They just took it. They don't give you

copies."

"Pity." Mix was determined to say his piece before parting from her. He

had rehearsed it for just such an occasion. "Miss Nash, you're the most

beautiful woman I've ever seen. You're just as beautiful in close-up as

from far away." He brought his face near hers. "More beautiful," he said

and he staggered upstairs, desperate not to show the pain he was in.

Unwilling to listen to all this, Gwendolen went into the drawing room,

attended but no longer physically supported by Queenie "Winthrop.

Hazel Akwaa was furiously angry. She wanted to run after Mix and

berate him but Nerissa held her arm and said, "No, Mum, don't. Leave it."

"How dare he say things like that to you?" Hazel spoke loudly enough

for Mix, by now on the first floor, to hear.

"I'm not the Queen, Mum. He doesn't have to get permission. I must be

really stupid, as I didn't realize he actually lived here. I mean, I know we

met him outside that time, but it never registered that he lived in this

house."

"I'm sorry you had to endure all that under my roof," said, Gwendolen

as Nerissa and Hazel went into the drawing room. Her tone was no longer

kindly toward Nerissa, whom she blamed as much as Mix for his

outburst.

Now she was home she wanted all these people to go. In an impatient way, she acknowledged Nerissa's kindness in fetching her from the hospital, but there was nothing to stay for. She had her prescribed medicaents and vitamins, she wasn't hungry, and her paramount desire was to lie on the sofa and open the post that Queenie had brought in from the hallway. There was bound to be a letter from Stephen Reeves. She was very tired and she wanted to read it before sleep overtook her. It was Nerissa who recognized how weary she was and took her mother and Queenie away, Queenie calling over her shoulder that Gwendolen must waste no time in seeing what she thought of the spring-cleaning she and Olive had done in the kitchen. Before opening her book, Gwendolen reflected that today was the anniversary of the first time Stephen Reeves came to the house to attend her mother. He had come downstairs and said, "It's a sad sight to see the old folks come to this." She had offered him tea and, because he looked hungry, that day's batch of homemade cakes. The compliments Mix had offered to Nerissa and the proximity of his face to hers had upset her more than she had showed at the time. She had

made a great effort at self-control in order not to cause trouble the

moment poor Miss Chawcer had come home after her stay in hospital,

but once she had taken her mother and Mrs. Winthrop home and was in

her own house ,she began to cry. All the telling herself that the man had

only said she was beautiful and come rather too close to her, that he was

a harmless fool, had no effect and she gave way to a storm of tears.

Crying was a release, more salutary than attempting to pull herself

together, and she was too young to be afraid of lastingmarks to her face.

She phoned the beauty salon she used andbooked to have her hair done,

a face massage, and a manicure.About to leave the house, she thought of

him again and shelooked out of a front window to see if the blue car was

parkeddown the hill. She knew the number by heart, had never had

to write it down, but there was no sign of him. Still, she went nervously to

her car and remained jumpy and alert until she was in the salon and her

hair was being washed. Speculation about him went around and around

the inside of her head as warm water splashed on its outside. What did

he want of her? That she should go out with him?

She told herself not to be elitist, nearly sure she'd got the difficult word

right. Perhaps not to be a snob. God knows, she had no right to be

snobbish about anyone, her family wasn't anything much, even though

Grandma claimed to be the daughter of a chief. This guy--she realized

she didn't know his name--was probably better educated than she was

and had a real job. He hadn't done her any harm, so why was she so

afraid of him? A man had once told her she had a true woman's intuitive

powers and perhaps she had, for she sensed something ugly about him,

something almost evil. This had been particularly apparent when he

brought his face close to hers. His eyes had seemed dead and his

expression utterly blank, even while he was saying those things about

her being beautiful. If only he could think of a way to get rid of him,

make sure he never came near her again.

Nico was approaching her with his drier and his brush. She turned her

head and gave him her glorious heart-melting smile.

Mix sat in his flat reading Killer Extraordinary. He quickly came upon an

illustration, a full-face photograph, and that reminded him of the ghost.

He laid the book down. Before he started reading he had heard the

departure of Nerissa--how nice she had been, how gentle and sweet--with

Ma Winthrop and that old bitch of a mother. How did a woman like that

come to have such a wonderful daughter? It was unimaginable. The way

she'd spoken about him when he went upstairs! Once he and Nerissa

were going out together, better than that, once they were married, he'd

have his revenge. He'd make his wife forbid her from the house. And

their marriage would happen. He was sure of it now. He'd brought his

face up to hers near enough to kiss her and she hadn't moved away. She

liked being told she was beautiful, of course she did. Tomorrow he'd go

up here on foot and stand outside and wait for her. If only he could sing

he'd serenade her.

Mix recognized how much his self-confidence had improved since he

had so successfully disposed of that girl's body. It was as if, having done

that in the face of such difficulty, he could do anything. Of course he

hadn't committed deliberate murder, it wasn't murder or even

manslaughter at all but "unlawful killing." They called it that when they

realized you couldn't help it. But if he had to he'd kill again. It wasn't

that much of a big deal. He knew he'd have a really good night's sleep

tonight. His worries were over and now, looking back, he wondered why

they had seemed so overwhelming. He had surmounted them, he had

dealt with them and they had dissolved like smoke.

His back was better. Two more ibuprofen and putting his feet up helped

enormously. As for the ghost, it never came inhere. If he was careful

never to look down those passages or going to that room the chances

were he wouldn't see it again. Of course he must move. It was a pity after

what he had spent on the flat, he would simply be making a present of a

nice little earner to old Chawcer, but there was no help for it. She might

not find it so profitable when the next tenant saw things up here he or

she didn't expect.

The water diviners, filing down a side street in Kilburn toward a mews

under which they were told an ancient stream still flowed, chatted

pleasantly to each other on such familiar subjects as astrology,

cartomancy, exorcism, numerology, the Tarot, ailurophilia, hypnotism,

the cult of Ashtaroth, and leprechauns. It was too early to get out their

divining rods. Shoshana usually secured for herself a female companion

on these walks, a witch or a fortune-teller, but today she walked alone,

thinking of the Mix Cellini dilemma. After about ten minutes of this she

decided she needed advice and she lingered until the end of the crocodile

where the witch caught up with her.

The witch was an old crony and Shoshana, while naming no names,

had no hesitation in presenting the problem to her.

"What do you think I should do, Hecate?"

The witch wasn't really called Hecate. The name in which her Catholic

parents had had her baptized was Helena. But Hecate had a more

magical and sinister sound, and it always impressed her better-educated

clients who understood its derivations.

"I could make you up a spell," she said, "at a discount, of course. I've

got a new one that gives the object psoriasis."

"That sounds nice but since I've got these two leads sort of ready-made I

don't like to waste them. I mean, I don't like to waste both of them."

"I see what you mean," said Hecate. "Look, we'll be over the

underground stream in a minute. Why don't you leave it with me and I'll

give you my answer by Monday."

"Well, don't be any longer than you can help. I don't want the trail going cold."

"I'll e-mail it by Monday morning without fail," said Hecate.

The flat was bigger than Nerissa had expected and very tidy. Her own

house could sometimes look like those interiors pictured in the

magazines she read at the dentist's, but only after Lynette had been

there for three or four hours and then not for long. Through the open

dining room door she glimpsed a carefully laid table, set with eight

places, of course, but withf lowers too and candles. No boyfriend of hers

had ever entertainedin his own home in this fashion. They had all been

well off, some of them very rich, but when she had gone back with them

their houses or flats had been as messy as hers, and though there was

an abundance of drink, cigarettes, and other aids to changing

consciousness, she had never seen a laid table or even food on a tray.

But Darel, she reminded herself sadly, wasn't her boyfriend or likely to be.

He was a gracious host. Nerissa was used to men singling her out and

being particularly nice to her, but she had always wondered about this,

knowing that if she had been plain and unknown she would have been

largely ignored. And the fact that Darel treated her and her mother and

his mother and Andrew's wife in exactly the same way, politely and

attentively, farf rom irritating her made her feel that this was how things

ought to be in society in general. But she did notice that when he was on

the other side of the room, replenishing drinks or checking on the dinner

it appeared he was cooking himself, he caught her eye rather often and

always smiled at her. When she arrived too, although he had paid her no

compliments, she was conscious as he took her coat that the look he gave

her was unmistakably admiring of her appearance, her piled-up hair and

the sleek red-gold dress she wore. She resolved that tonight she would

forget her stringent discipline in the matter of diet and eat everything she

was offered. She would do justice to his cooking.

Music was playing, but very softly. It was the classical kind that she

always said she didn't understand, but she liked this. It was gentle and

sweet with no underlying harsh beat. Apart from gatherings at her

parents' house, this was the first party she had ever been to where no one

drank too much, no one disappeared into a bedroom with a stranger, the

conversation wasn't smart and malicious, and the language never

degenerated into obscenity. It should therefore have been dull, but

it wasn't. Nor did the subjects discussed center on domesticity and the

property market. Her brother and sister-in-law were both lawyers and

they talked about cases that had recently come up in court. They moved

on to the stock market, which Darel was as happy to talk about as he

was about politics. Everyone had varying, but not ill-tempered, views on

the Iraq war. Mr. Jones was a head teacher with informed radical

opinions on education. If Nerissa missed the gossip, she liked being

asked what she thought, and she very much liked not being treated as

the empty-headed model with only her looks and her money to

recommend her. Just once she felt awkward and that was when Andrew

mentioned a case in which he had been prosecuting and the defendant

was a fortune-teller. Everyone present, though in a measured and

civilized fashion, condemned fortune-telling as rubbish and astrology

along with it. Darel was particularly scathing. Nerissa said nothing,

unwilling to appear as the only one there who knew the names of the

cards in the Tarot and had actually had her future told.

But she was puzzled as to why Darel had invited her. She couldn't think

of a reason but she could see her visit as a prelude to something else. At

the end of the evening there would surely be a follow-up. And then she'd

try to make herself more into the sort of woman he'd like. She'd learn to

be tidier and more methodical, she'd read more so that she could better

understand what people like the Joneses were talking about and talk like

they did herself. She'd buy some classical CDs and stop playing hip-hop

and that song about the prettiest girl in town.

Her parents were the first to leave and Darel accompanied them to the

front door. Nerissa had noticed that when the door was shut, nothing of

what was said in the hallway could be heard by those in the living room.

Only the sounds of Darel's calling good-bye and the closing the front door were audible.

She let her brother and sister-in-law go, knowing she mustn't be the

last to leave. Yet, oh how much she would have liked to be! She was in

love with Darel Jones, knowing this quite clearly because she had never

been in love before. He had never kissed her, never done more than

shake hands with her, but she knew she wanted to spend the rest of her

life with him. She was doomed, she thought, to thinking about him at

every waking moment with no hope of her love being returned. But surely

a little hope still remained?

Five minutes after her brother's departure, she got up to go, said a polite

but not at all obsequious good-bye to Mr. and Mrs. Jones, and preceded

Darel out of the room. His closing of the living room door behind him sent

a shiver of anticipation down her spine. He fetched her coat, held it up for

her, said, when she thought utter silence was to be maintained until their

farewells, "Have you had any more trouble from that guy who was

following you?"

"Not really," she said, and thought, why lie to him of all people? "Well,

yes, I have. Today. I won't go into it, it's a long story, but he spoke to me.

Put his face up to mine actually, right up, and said things. Oh, nothing

horrible, just compliments."

"I see." He was silent, thoughtful. "Next time that happens,next time

anything happens, will you call me? Here's my card with my mobile

number. Will you do that?"

"But you're such a long way away."

"Not that far and I'm a fast driver. Just call me. Especially at night. Don't

hesitate after dark."

"All right," she said. "Good-bye. Thank you for asking me,I've had a nice

time. You're a very good cook."

"Good night, Nerissa."

**

Shoshana looked at her e-mails before going to bed on Sundaynight.

Only one had come. It read:

Shoshana: On mature consideration I have decided phoning his chief

executive your wisest course. Teratomancy has revealed to me that this

individual's name is Desmond Pearson.I have also made you up a spell

which I am not risking on line but sending by snail mail. It is a very

effective one that cramps the object's spinal column and lasts up to one

week, though it is renewable. Yours, in the shadows, Hecate.

Very satisfactory. First thing tomorrow morning--that is, at ten, the late

hour at which these sort of people got in to work--she would phone

Desmond Pearson and tell him MixC ellini was breaking the rules by

instituting a private contract with her, and as soon as the spell arrived

she would think of ways of administering it. She could always think of

something, it was a gift she had.

Chapter 20

The lodger might be in or he might be out. For once Gwendolen had no

idea. She was too weak to bother, too sleepy to listen for his comings and

goings. That nonsense this morning, young people behaving in an

ungoverned way, as she never had, had taken it out of her. If they had all

gone as soon as she was home, she was convinced she would by now

have been feeling much better instead of as weak as a kitten. Talking of

kittens, here had been a letter from Mr. Singh among the few that

had come for her, complaining that Otto had killed and eaten both his

guinea fowl. Being a peaceable man, he wrote, he didn't intend to "take

the matter further." He just wanted her to be aware of the "predatory

instincts and achievements" of her "savage pet." Meanwhile, he had

purchased two geese which would be more than a match for the

"ornithophagous beast."Gwendolen cared very little about guinea fowl or,

come to that, Otto, but she grimly contrasted this excellently educated

"native,"his use of polysyllabic words and his perfect spelling, with the

illiterate English of the present generation. Even she wasn't entirely sure

if "ornithophagous" meant "bird-eating."

The rest of the post had been the electricity bill, the menu from a

Vietnamese takeaway, and an invitation to the opening of a new Bond

Street store. Nothing from Stephen Reeves. Perhaps he was away on

holiday. He had always gone away a lot and no doubt he hadn't changed.

She would never forget,even after they were ultimately reunited she

wouldn't forget,how he had been on his honeymoon while she waited

and waited for him to come. Wherever he was now, he'd probably be

coming back today or tomorrow.

The new orderliness in the kitchen, which she surveyed after she had

had a sleep, made her cross. What business had those two to go about

tidying her home? Now she wouldn't be able to find anything. All the

tinned food was in one cupboard, all the brushes and dusters in another.

Someone had washed the dusters, removing the encrusted grime of years

that had comfortably transformed them from yellow to gray, gray to dark

brown. Now they were more or less yellow again. She slammed the cupboard door in disgust. And what had become of all the things she kept in the washhouse?

The bulb in the overhead lamp had gone out. She wasn't climbing up to change that now, not in her state of health. Olive or Queenie could do it tomorrow. She looked for her flashlight, which should have been in the fridge so that she could see it when she opened the fridge door and the light came on. The flashlight wasn't there and she had to hunt for it, finally discovering it on a cupboard shelf along with some can openers, a screwdriver, and a box of shoe-cleaning equipment. Olive and Queenie and their tidiness mania again. In the halfdark she lifted the lid of the copper. It had formerly held a lot of clothes. Although just about past wearing, these would have come in useful for tearing up for washrags and plugging the sink, its original plug having perished years before.

Olive and Queenie had very high-handedly disposed of the lot. She shone the beam of the torch inside, illuminating the depths. What was that lying in the bottom? A mysterious object to Gwendolen's eyes. At first she saw it as a sling, the kind of weapon she remembered being taught in Sunday school that David had employed against Goliath,

then surely as a garment. A kind of truss? It looked hardly strong

enough to contain a hernia. Perhaps it was a body belt but if it was, it

lacked anything in the nature of a purse. After several attempts, she

succeeded in fishing it out by means of a pole with a hook on the end of

it, originally intended for opening a skylight. She would show it to Olive or

Queenie. The thing must belong to one of them.

Exhausted from her explorations, she went to bed and slept heavily till

morning.

Off to spend Sunday with friends who had a house with a rive rfrontage

at Marlow, Nerissa left her house in Rodney's car ten minutes before Mix

arrived on foot. He had read in a magazine that the thirties film star

Ramon Novarro had kept his figure by walking a mile around Hollywood

every day, holding his navel pressed as near as he could to his spine.

Emulating him on the fairly long walk, surely a mile, from St. Blaise

Avenue down Ladbroke Grove and along Holland Park Avenue to Campden

Hill Square, Mix was conscious of twinges in his back. They were nothing

like the agony he had suffered the other night and he tried to ignore

them.

Her car was parked outside. Good. He had been afraid he had started

out too late and she'd have gone out. For about half an hour he hung

about in the square, walking down and back again. The milk arrived and

sat on the doorstep in the full sun. She must be counting on the breeze

keeping the temperature down. He was wondering if she had already

taken the newspaper in when it came and was deposited on the doormat

beside the milk.

Someone would steal it and the milk as well. She'd thank him for ringing

the doorbell and handing in the cartons and the enormous Sunday paper.

It might even be possible for him not to hand but to carry them in for her.

If he did that she'd be bound to ask him to stay for coffee. She'd probably

be only half-dressed, in deshabille as they said. He imagined her in

a baby doll nightdress, barely covered by a diaphanous robe, and he

marched up to the door and rang the bell.

No reply. He put his ear to the grille of the entryphone. Silence. He rang

again. She wasn't in. She must have gone out on foot, running perhaps,

or caught a train somewhere. He was bitterly disappointed. So near and

yet so far, he said to himself, going back down the steps but still

lingering in case she came back from her run.

No one went jogging for as long as two hours. He'd try again tomorrow.

Then, walking back, he remembered that he'd better go in to work

tomorrow and he remembered too that he'd never phoned head office to

say he was ill on Friday, he hadn't phoned them at all. And he hadn't

looked for messages on his mobile or checked his answerphone. Of course

it wasn't important. If he couldn't take an afternoon off without crawling

to management like a trainee after all the years of service, who could? He

expected messages from at least one of the three clients he'd let down on

Friday but, as it turned out, all three had phoned him, one disappointed

and pleading, another furious, and the third threatening to take her

business elsewhere. Nothing from head office. Nothing from Jack

Fleisch. He'd have been amazed if Mr. Pearson bothered with him, and

here was nothing from him either. No doubt he had thought better of

further reproaching such an asset to the firm as Mix was with his

experience and his efficiency.

The day had as usual become very fine and warm. The Indianman's

geese were grooming each other under a palm tree in the sunshine. It was

the only tree in the garden Mix was able to identify and he recognized it

from an illustration in his grandmother's Bible. What had become of that

Bible he had no idea. But he remembered the picture.
The Indian man's

palm looked as if it had been there for years and years,
long before he

and his wife came. Mix was surprised that it survived the
winters, Nottingham

Hill being a lot colder than Jerusalem. He had never
noticed it till this

morning. But he had never spent so much time watching
the garden as

he did now.

The two patches of freshly dug earth looked very obvious
to him, the

one where he had dug at first and where the heaviness of
the soil defeated

him, and the other that he had chosen for Danila's
resting place. There

was nothing to be done about it. He must wait for the
weeds to grow

back and he had no idea how long this would take. If only
he'd had more

time he would have dug deeper. It troubled him a little
that her body lay

only three feet down, less than three feet really, because
although she

was thin, a section through her at the rib cage would be
several inches.

Still, who was going to look?

Old Chawcer never went out there, or never had to his
knowledge, and

was even less likely to do so now. He had never seen Ma
Winthrop or Ma

Fordyce venture into the garden. The old man on the side
with the

conservatory never looked over the wall, as far as he
could tell. The

house on the otherside was all flats, but the basement, or "garden flat,"

had been empty all the time Mix had been there and he imagined that

the damp made it impossible to live in. No one would be interested in two

rectangular dug-over plots. Bodies buried in the earth, according to Dr.

Camps in Medical and Scientific Investigations in the Christie Case,

became skeletons after a few months. Not that long. By next spring she

would be just bones.

He had left her just as she was, naked and wrapped in the red sheet.

The plastic bag he had slid off her, brought it back upstairs and carefully

cut it up, depositing the small pieces in his rubbish sack for collection.

Twice he had checked the copperto be sure nothing was left behind. It

was dark in the washhouseand impossible to see to the bottom of the

copper but hecould tell there was no room for anything to be left behind

...

A cold tremor passed through him. The thong. What had become of the

thong? Now he remembered clearly feeling the bulge of it in his pocket

and dropping it into the copper after he had heaved the body in. He had

never retrieved it, of that he was sure. It must still be there. What does it

matter, he thought, no one will look in there, she hadn't lifted that lid for

years, probably never will again. Besides, he could go down and get it,

almost whenever he liked. Now if he wanted. He was nearly certain she

had still been in bed when he came back from his walk to Campden Hill

and even when she got up, he'd take herself straight to that sofa in the

drawing room.

He pocketed his keys and came out onto the landing. Bright sunshine

streamed through the window above the stairs, so of course Reggie's

ghost was hiding itself away in some dark corner. As he started down the

tilted staircase he heard the front door open and close and a voice,

unmistakably belonging to Ma Fordyce, called out, "Hiya, Gwen! You still

in the land of the living?"

Old fool. Now he'd have to wait for her to leave again and that might not

be for hours.

Hoping she wouldn't have to climb all those stairs, Olive went straight

into the drawing room, still carrying the two bags of food she had bought

on the way. She was wearing her new black trousers and a lemon-colored

linen jacket that matched her new hair tint. To her relief Gwendolen was

up, though still in her nightclothes and lying on the sofa.

"I've brought you some goodies, dear."

"Timeo Danaos et donaferentes," said Gwendolen.

"I don't know any Tim, Gwen," said Olive with a hearty laugh, "and I

can't understand a word of that lingo. How are you?"

"As well as can be expected. I've no appetite so you needn't have

bothered with goodies, as you call them."

"Don't be such an old curmudgeon. I'm trying to help. I'm going to make

us a coffee each, won't be long."

While she was gone Gwendolen investigated the carrierbags. Chocolatewell, she could eat that--biscuits, marzipanfruits, a nasty sponge cake

with mock cream. Still, Olive hadn't done badly. At least there wasn't a

lot of salad stuff and green apples with no taste to them.

Olive reappeared with milky coffee and ginger nuts on a plate. "You're

so thin you can eat as much as you like. Aren'tyou lucky?"

"You don't mean you're dieting. At your age?"

"I always say you're never too old to take pride in yourappearance. "

"On the subject of appearance, is this yours?"

The object that was put into Olive's hands made her giggle.

"Are you joking, Gwen? Is this some sort of game?"

"I found it in the bottom of my copper, in my washhouse. Is it yours and

what is it?"

" Well, Gwen, you've never been married and I knew you were innocent

about a lot of things, but I didn't know it went that far."

So Olive took her

revenge for years of rudeness and ingratitude. "Even a child would know

what that is."

"Thank you. You've said quite enough. Now perhaps you'll tell me what

it is."

This caused Olive some embarrassment, which she tried not to show.

"Well, it's a--it's a kind of pair of--well, knickers. Girls wear them. Once

I'd have said 'only that sort of girl,' but things have changed, haven't

they? Now even nice girls, I mean, not actresses or--well, stripteasers, if

you know what I mean."

"Oh, I know what you mean. In spite of my profound naivete and

resemblance to a retarded child ... "

"I didn't say that, Gwen." Though not a slave to political correctness,

Olive shuddered at some of the things that snapped off Gwendolen's

tongue.

"No? I think you did. In spite of all my cerebral deficiencies, I do just

about know what you mean. Don't, please don't, tell me it's yours. "

Olive was really incensed by now. "Of course it isn't mine. Do you

suppose that would go around my hips even if I was so--so ... "

"Meretricious? Licentious? Concupiscent? Vain?"

"Oh, I've no patience. If you weren't unwell and didn't know what you're

saying I'd be really cross."

At last Gwendolen saw that she had gone too far. Sustaining this kind

of altercation took more energy than she was capable of today. She drank

her coffee, which she had to admit (though not aloud) was very good. "Do

you suppose it could be Queenie's?"

"Of course not. This has been worn by some young woman. A girl of twenty."

Nerissa immediately came into Gwendolen's mind and along with her,

the lodger, Cellini. The minute she arrived home, he had been coming

out of her kitchen. Why? He had a kitchen of his own. "Did you or

Queenie put my bag of old clothes on top of the copper?"

"Certainly not. I found a bag of clothes in the washhouse and I left them

there. Very musty and smelly they were, but there--it's not my business."

"No, indeed." After that, Gwendolen decided to be gracious. "It was

very kind of you to buy me the chocolate and those other things. What do

I owe you?"

"Nothing, Gwen. Don't be absurd. If you want my opinion and I dare say

you don't, that Mr. Cellini had a girl here while you were in hospital and

they were larking about where they shouldn't have been. People these

days--well, I don't like talking about these things--but they do--well, have

baths together, and it's just possible ... You see, you could stand up in a

copper which you can't in an ordinary bath."

"I've no idea what you mean," said Gwendolen. "I need something lighter

than Darwin to read. Before you go, would you see if you can find The

Golden Bowl? Henry James, you know."

He watched Ma Fordyce leave and once he had seen her disappear around the corner, he went downstairs, careful to tread softly.

The drawing room door was open and on the sofa he saw old Chawcer

lying on her back, asleep with her mouth open. Always one to notice

domestic order and its reverse, he observed that the kitchen was fast

reverting to its normal chaos. The old girl had only been home twenty-four hours.

Confident he would find the thong where he had left it, he tiptoed into

the washhouse and lifted the lid of the copper. Of course it was

impossible to see down to the bottom of it. How did women ever get the

water out of there? Perhaps they didn't. Perhaps there was always some

lingering, stagnant and smelly, in the depths. There must be a flashlight

somewhere. Nearly sure he'd once seen her with a flashlight in her hand,

he padded

around

the

kitchen,

looking

into

cupboards

and

opening drawers. No flashlight, but he did find a candle and a box of

matches. Afraid she'd hear the match striking, he waited and listened,

holding the lit candle in his hand. Once he was sure he wasn't dragging

herself off the sofa to come and find him, he put the hand holding the

candle as far as he could down the deep well of the copper. The light was

quite adequate to show him walls and a base apparently made of some

sort of bluish pottery--and nothing else. Nothing. No thong. The copper

was empty.

Still he held the candle there as if continuing to light the hollow space

would ultimately reveal that it wasn't as empty as he'd thought at first.

He stared down, closing his eyes and opening them again until a drop of

boiling wax fell on his thumb, making him jump back and very nearly cry

out. Instead he cursed under his breath, pinched out the flame and put

candle and matches back where he had found them. He walked back

slowly, passing the drawing room door. Old Chawcer was still asleep.

Had she found the thong? Or was it one of the other two? It seemed to

him that they must immediately have known it had belonged to the

missing girl whose picture appeared almost daily in the papers. Only

today there had been a bold headline: HAVE YOU SEEN DANILA?

Upstairs in his own flat, he asked himself if he should do anything. Ask

old Chawcer or ask one of the others? But he was very alive to the

awkwardness of it. How to explain what he was doing in the washhouse,

why he was even touching the copper? They would want to know who the

thong belonged to. He couldn't think of any explanation except the true

one for how the thong got where it was. Perhaps they wouldn't ask. Mix

had very little idea of how other people might react to his own activities

or whether they might think things he regarded as normal and ordinary

as quite different from that. But he had some small inkling through

remarks made by the three elderly women that an older, a much older,

generation than his own might be embarrassed by a garment so blatantly

sexual as a G-string. If only they were, they might not mention it, they

might prefer to pretend they had never found it, might throw it away in

disgust or shock. You wish, he said to himself, but he began to think

there was a possibility of this.

While she was still asleep, he went into her bedroom and examined the

bottles and packets she had brought back from the hospital and left on

her bedside table. Among them was a jar with a label on its side that

said: Two to be taken at night to promote sleep. Certain she wouldn't have

counted them, he helped himself to eight. If he needed more after four

nights he could always come back. Instead of two, he took three and

slept heavily for three hours. After that he was wide awake and passed

the rest of the night uneasily.

He kept thinking of arguments against his optimistic theory of the three

(or one or two) of the old women disposing of the thong. Suppose Ma

Fordyce, say, had read all that stuff about Danila working in what the

papers called a "beauty salon and gym," suppose she knew very well

what the thong was and decided a girl from a place like that would be

more than likely to wear a thong--suppose all that and then would she go

to the police? Easy to say, as he had in the bright light of afternoon, that

this was a crazy farfetched idea. In the small hours it seemed reasonable.

He had to see the Holland Park woman at nine-thirty and he was

twenty minutes late. She was too pleased he had come at all to reproach

him for failing to be there on time. On his way down to Chelsea he

checked his calls and was quite surprised to see a message from Mr.

Pearson's assistant. Would he call to arrange an urgent meeting with the

chief executive? This gave Mix a cold feeling but one quite unlike the

tremor that had lurched through him when he remembered the missing

thong. Surely Pearson wasn't all that concerned about a few missed

appointments. He was very polite to the man in Chelsea and showed him

how to adjust the belt on his treadmill himself, providing the weakling

was strong enough to wield a spanner. For all his working out, he still

had the muscle development of an anorexic girl. Since his exploits with

pick and spade, Mix had begun to pride himself on his physical strength.

Not anxious to appear in too much of a hurry, he fitted a new belt to a

machine in Primrose Hill before phoning Mr. Pearson's assistant. She was

a chilly young woman with an inflated idea of her own importance.

"You took your time," she said. "There's not much point in leaving you

people messages if you never check them."

"What time does he want to see me?"

"Immediately. Like twelve-thirty."

"For God's sake, it's a quarter-past now."

"Then you'd better get on your bike, hadn't you?" She suddenly became

almost human, if in a nasty way. "He's livid, incandescent. I wouldn't

want to be in your shoes."

Mix got on his bike, or rather, drove as fast as the traffic allowed down

the Outer Circle and Baker Street. It was still nearly twelve forty-five

when the assistant showed him into Mr. Pearson's office.
Pearson was

the only person Mix had ever come across who called
people, in this case

his staff, by their surnames alone. He associated such
usage with what

he knew of the army, men in prison or up in court, and he
didn't like it.

"Well, Cellini?"

What kind of response was he supposed to make to
that?"

"No answer was the stern reply," said Pearson, laughing
at his feeble

joke. He added as if it were an afterthought, "We're going
to have to let

you go."

Chapter 21

From her sofa in the drawing room Gwendolen saw the
postman come.

She saw him walking up the path and heard the clatter of
the letterbox

as he dropped Stephen Reeves's letter on the mat.
Already feeling

stronger, she got herself off the sofa without too much
strain and went to

the front door for the letter. It wasn't from Stephen but
from a charity

appealing for funds to research cystic fibrosis. Her
disappointment

quickly gave way to reason. If he was away on holiday he
wouldn't

have come back until Saturday or Sunday, so could hardly
have got a

letter to her by today.

She was hardly back on the sofa, thinking that in an hour
or so she

would go upstairs and have a bath, when Queenie arrived. Queenie

refused to burden herself with bags and had brought her offerings in a shopping trolley.

"What an enormous appetite you and Olive must think I have," said

Gwendolen. She examined the packet of Duchy Originals, the bag of

marshmallows, the two tubes of Rolos, the dairy-free yogurts, and the

pack of couscous salad without enthusiasm. "Perhaps you'll put it all in

the fridge. Oh, and"--as Queenie went--"please don't mislay the flashlight again."

Queenie wondered what eccentric quirk or whim would make anyone

keep a flashlight in a fridge but she didn't move it and, coming back, sat

meekly in a chair opposite Gwendolen.

The weather being so unseasonably warm, she had put on her new pink

suit and, though she knew such a happening unlikely, she had been

hoping for her friend to compliment her on her appearance. Instead she

was shown a red and black pouch thing on a kind of narrow belt that,

without ever having seen anything like it before, she immediately knew to

be part of the costume (if you could call it that) of a certain kind of

dancer. The realization made her flush darkly.

"I suppose you know what it is and that's what you're blushing about."

"Of course I know what it is, Gwen."

She had spoken as she always did, very mildly, but Gwendolen chose to

see it as recalcitrance. "All right, no need to bite my head off. Olive thinks

it may be the property of a--er, paramourof Mr. Cellini's."

"Does it matter, dear? It doesn't look as if it cost very much."

"I don't like these mysteries," said Gwendolen. "It means he or she or

both of them have been in my washhouse."

"You could ask him."

"I intend to. Of course he's out at present, doing whatever it is he does."

Gwendolen sighed. "I think I shall have a bath in a minute."

This was a hint to her friend to leave, but Queenie took it differently.

"Would you like me to help you, dear? I shouldn't mind at all. I bathed

my dear husband every day when he was so ill."

Gwendolen contrived a stagy shudder. "No, thank you very much. I can

manage perfectly. By the way," she said, though it wasn't by any way,

"that Indian has written to me that Otto has eaten his guinea fowl."

Temporarily forgetting Mr. Singh's prose prowess, she said, "Of course no

decent English person would break the law by keeping what amounts to

chickens in urban surroundings, virtually in the middle of London."

Very little roused Queenie, but as a voluntary worker for the

Commission for Racial Equality, she. could become irate when

discriminatory remarks were made'."you know, Gwendolen,or perhaps

you don't know, that if you said something like that in public you could

be prosecuted. You're actually committing an offense." She added in a

less haughty tone, "Mr.S ingh is a lovely man. He's very clever, he was a

professor in the Punjab."

Gwendolen burst out laughing. "How ridiculous you are, Queenie. You

should hear yourself. And now I'm going to have my bath, so you'd better run away."

On the way out Queenie met Otto in the hallway. He was sitting on the

stairs near the bottom, part of a mouse gripped in his jaws, its head lying

beside him on the worn carpet. "Go away,you horror," she said to him.

Otto gave her the sort of look that made Queenie very glad she was

quite a large human being instead of small, four legged,and covered in

fur. He managed to pick up the mouse's head as well as its hindquarters

and streaked toward the first floor with his burden. Mix coming in the

front door at that moment muttered something incomprehensible to

Queenie and followed the cat upstairs.

Mr. Pearson had insisted he continue working through the week,

though Mix would have liked to leave then and there. As for working out

four weeks' notice ... ! They'd pay him till the end of next month, that

was something. Of course it hadn't been the missed appointments and

failed calls that had made Pearson sack him but a call he'd had only that

morning from that old bitch Shoshana. Mounting the tiled flight, Mix

thought self-pityingly that nothing but trouble had come to him from his

association with Shoshana's Spa. He had gone there in the first place

only in the hope it would introduce him to Nerissa, but he had got to

know her anyway, she was almost his friend now, and through his own

determination not through any help from the spa. That had simply

brought him an association with Danila, who had so insulted and

provoked him that he'd had to react violently against her. Frankly, she'd

forced him to kill her. He'd agreed to produce and sign that contract,

again because of Danila, and now the result of it was that Shoshana had

called Pearson and told him about it and then had the nerve to allege

he'd never carried out his part of it. The spite, the malevolence, took his

breath away. What had he ever done to her? Nothing but fail to restore two

pieces of equipment, not because he hadn't seen to them and told her

what was wrong but because he hadn't yet been able to get the parts. He

went into the flat and took a Diet Coke out of the fridge. When he had

peeled back the cover and opened the hole in the lid, he drank about an

inch of it and filled the can up with gin. That was better. Of course he'd

have to get another job. That meant the Job Centre and probably

drawing benefit for a while. The DSS would pay his rent, thank God. It

was time he got something out of the government, it was his right, he'd

paid enough in. Of course it wasn't just Shoshana's treachery that had

stitched him up, it was Ed too, going to head office instead of keeping

quiet for a few days when Mix hadn't made those two calls for him. That

was what started it.

One thing Pearson could be sure of. He'd take with him as many of his

clients as he could persuade to come. He'd undercut his old firm--why

shouldn't he set up in business on his own? This might be the making of

him. He drank some more of the gin and Coke mixture. Everyone knew

how much better it was to be self-employed than an employee. A fantasy

began forming in Mix's mind of himself as founder and boss of the largest

exercise equipment and gym fittings company in the country, a megaconglomerate that took over Tunturi and PJ Fitness and of course

Fiterama. He pictured the joy of sitting at his huge ebony desk in his

glass-walled thirtieth-floor office, two glamorous secretaries in microskirt in the anteroom, and Pearson coming to him cap in hand to beg a

small pension for his enforced early retirement ...

Meanwhile, freedom lay before him. He'd use the time in cementing his

friendship with Nerissa. Maybe think of some other reason to call on her

and get inside the house. Suppose he delivered a parcel to her? It

wouldn't have to be real, it wouldn't have had to come from a mail order

company or be something she'd ordered from a shop, it could be just old

magazines wrapped up in brown paper. She'd understand once it had got

him inside and she'd talked to him properly. Or he could pretend to be

peddling election campaign literature, take her some candidate's

manifesto that had been delivered first to him. There must be a local

election coming up next month, there always was, wasn't there? Anyway,

she wouldn't know anymore than he did.

Once he was taking her about, getting in the public eye, the offers from

TV and newspaper editors and fashion mags would start coming in. He

might not even need to set up in business on his own. Or if he did, the

money he got from being Nerissa's squeeze would get him off to a flying

start. Dreaming on, he paused to congratulate himself on his resilience,

how rapidly he was recovering from losing his job, what those supposed

to know called one of life's major setbacks, comparable to bereavement.

Next day, though, he had to work. His head was banging from the gin

and sometimes it swam so that he nearly fell, but he had to work. Every

call he made he told the client he had resigned and would be setting up

in business on his own. If they would consider staying with him he would

make a special charge for them, less than they had been paying, and

they would be assured of top-quality service. Three said they would

remain where they were but the fourth agreed to come with him, after

telling him he looked pale and asking him if he was all right. At head

office he ran into Ed, who told him Steph was pregnant, so they had

decided to postpone the wedding until after the baby was born.

"Steph says she doesn't fancy looking fat on her wedding day. Her mum

thinks people will say we only got married because she was pregnant. "

"I've resigned," said Mix.

"So I heard."

Ed's expression told him that what he'd heard was a different version of

events. "You telling management I'd let you down, which was an

exaggeration to say the least, made it impossible for me to stay."

"Oh, yes? What do you reckon you did then? Acted like a mate? Stood

in for me when I was sick?"

"Why don't you fuck off?" said Mix.

That was the end of a beautiful friendship. He couldn't care less. He

thought of driving up to the spa and having it out with Shoshana. But he

ought to remember the spa was number thirteen, a fact which might be

at the root of all his troubles. And when he thought about it, about that

darkened room with the draperies and the figures, the wizard and the

owl, and above all of Shoshana herself, dealing as it seemed to him in

love and death, he realized he was afraid of her. Not that he put it like

that even in that part of his mind which talked to itself, advising,

warning, and resolving. There, he said he should be cautious. It was one

thing her getting on the phone and spreading slanders about him; he

was more wary of darker deeds, the kind of thing witches used to do spells cast, demons raised. All rubbish of course, but he'd once thought

ghosts rubbish and now he lived with one.

By Saturday he'd have more time, all the time in the world, and that

was when he'd begin his real efforts to see Nerissa. Meanwhile he'd plan

what his campaign was going to be.

A cosmetic company with a fast-expanding line in makeup for black

women had asked Nerissa to be their "Face of 2004." This year they had

used a famous white model and Nerissa would be the first black woman

for this sort of role. The money was mind-blowing, the work minimal.

Visiting their Mayfair salon for preliminary tests, she wondered why she

wasn't feeling a greater thrill. But she didn't wonder for long. She knew.

Darel Jones had made it plain he wanted her for a friend only, someone

to protect perhaps, a mate, a standby to make up the numbers at dinner.

Her mother said a man and a woman can't be friends, they have to be

lovers or nothing. Nerissa knew differently. Perhaps what her mother said

had been true when she was young. It wasn't true now that women had

careers and approached nearer to equality. She knew men who weren't

gay but who had a woman friend with whom they had been at school or

university and were close to for years without ever even exchanging a

kiss. Was that how it was going to be for her and Darel?

Not if she could help it. Sometimes she felt positive, at other times like

she did now, rather despondent, with nothing to distract her from the

certainty that what she wanted more than anything in the world, that he

should fall in love with her,would never happen. The man Cellini hadn't

shown himself outside her house since she had seen him on Saturday.

Seeing him was the last thing she wanted but, on the other hand, if he

showed up in his car and waited for her to appear, it would be an excuse

for calling Darel.

She wandered about her house, newly cleaned and tidied by Lynette,

and resolved to try and keep it that way. She ought not to be so messy,

Mum was always saying so, saying she had been brought up to be neat

and this was the result of too much money too soon. Darel's flat was a

miracle of order. It wouldn't always be like that, she thought, picking up

a tissue she had dropped on the bathroom floor, no doubt he had made

it specially tidy for his guests, but he was obviously a well

disciplined man. In the unlikely event of his coming here—and with each

day that passed it seemed to become less probable he would be put off

her by all the cups and glasses that habitually stood around, the

magazines dumped on the floor, and absurd combinations like a bottle of

nail varnish in the fruit bowl. She was as bad as old Miss Chawcer, who,

Aunt Olive said, kept a flashlight in the fridge and bread in a bag on the

floor.

On Friday afternoon, Dad once more having the Akwaas' car, she had

promised to drive her mother to St. Blaise House. Hazel said it would be

polite for her to call on Miss Chawcer, ask how she was and if there was

anything she could do. Miss Chawcer was so very old and frail, she had

been ill and must really be quite helpless.

"Oh, Mum, don't ask me. He lives there. Can't Andrew do it?"

"Andrew will be in court in Cambridge. You needn't come in, Nerissa,

just drop me."

So Nerissa had said she would. She'd drop her mother and come back

for her after an hour. After all, if she did see the man, or the man saw

her and came out to speak to her, she could call Darel on her car-phone.

She dressed carefully, mistress as she was of the smart-casual look, in

new olive drab combat trousers, a low-cut top and satin jacket. But when

she was ready she realized that the clothes designed to attract Darel

would also be attractive to the man, so she took them all off and got back

into her jeans and T-shirt. Besides, though this was inimical to

everything she worked to attain and to everything those she worked for

took as gospel, she believed men never noticed what a woman wore, only

that she "looked good" or did not.

It would be just her luck when she had no time to spare to find the man waiting outside, but no one was there. Campden Hill Square lay deserted and silent, sizzling in the heat that continued into September. Her car had been standing in the sun and the driver's seat was almost hot enough to burn her. She picked up her mother from Acton and drove down to St. Blaise Avenue, dropping her off outside Miss Chawcer's house. There was no sign of the man, nor did she meet him driving to Tesco in West Kensington, where she did her week's shopping, buying in addition to a quantity of sparkling water, a lot of salad stuff, and some fish, two bottles of a very good Pinot Grigio because she had noticed that this was what Darel drank. The spell that disabled its victim's spinal column came by second-class post. Hecate had always been as mean as hell. Shoshana had expected some potion or powder, which would have meant she had to think up a way of administering it and virtually eliminated anyone she had no easy access to, but this was only incantations over a smoking mixture in a crucible. As far as Shoshana could see, the spell might as well have been sent by e-mail. On the other hand, it was miles long and Hecate was too cheeseparing to get herself a scanner.

"I may as well give it a go," Shoshana said to the wizard and the owl. Who

better to try it out on than Mix Cellini?

Gwendolen had graduated from the sofa and was sitting in an armchair,

well into the last chapter of The Golden Bowl, the thong in a brown paper

bag on her lap, ready to show to the lodger. Hazel had let herself in with

her aunt's key, and though Gwendolen didn't jump or look as if she was

about to have a heart attack, she seemed less than pleased to see her.

She didn't quite ask her visitor what she was doing here.

"I must get

those keys back. I suppose your aunt had another one cut. Without

asking me of course."

"How are you?"

"Oh, I'm much better, my dear." Gwendolen was softening. She put the

book down with the letter from the cystic fibrosis charity to mark the

place. "What have you got there?" Seedless white grapes, William pears,

Ferrero-Rocher chocolates, and a bottle of Merlot. Gwendolen was less

disapproving than usual. She never ate any fruit except stewed apples

but she would enjoy the chocolates and the wine. "I see you're more

discerning than your aunt and her friend."

Hazel didn't know what to say. She had realized she was going to find

conversation difficult with this elderly lady whom once, long ago, her own

father would have called a bluestocking. Hazel didn't read much and was

aware she couldn't talk about books or any of the things that probably

interested Miss Chawcer. She was struggling to comment on the weather,

the improvement in Miss Chawcer's health, and the beauty of her house

when the doorbell rang.

"Who on earth can that be?"

"Do you want to see anyone or shall I say to come back another time?"

"Just get rid of them," said Gwendolen. "Say what you like."

It might be a letter from Stephen Reeves come by special delivery.

Gwendolen hadn't yet heard from him and she was growing quite

anxious. Suppose the letter had gone astray? Hazel went to the door. A

man of about sixty, tall and handsome and wearing a turban, stood on

the doorstep. To Hazel's eyes he looked very like a Pathan warrior she

had once seen in a film about the North-West Frontier.

"Good afternoon, madam. Mr. Singh from St. Mark's Road to see Miss

Chawcer, please."

"I'm afraid Miss Chawcer hasn't been well. She's been in hospital. Could

you possibly come back tomorrow? Well, not tomorrow. Say Sunday?"

"Certainly I say Sunday, madam. I return eleven A.M."

"What did he want?" Gwendolen asked.

"I didn't ask. Should I have?"

"It doesn't matter. I know, anyway. It's about his wretched guinea fowl.

Otto must have eaten them. I found feathers on the stairs. Now I expect

this man wants compensation."

Hazel was beginning to think this a very strange household, what with

this old bluestocking and the stalker upstairs and now a person with a

German name who ate the neighbors' poultry. She began to look forward

to Nerissa's return and was relieved when the doorbell rang.

"Who is it this time? I can't think why I've suddenly become so

popular."

"It's my daughter."

"Ah." Gwendolen inevitably associated the daughter, and would

associate her for the rest of the life that remained to her, with

uncontrolled amorous behavior in her hallway. "I don't suppose she will

want to come in."

Hazel saw this as an unprovoked put-down and was very glad to be

leaving. "Why had Aunty Olive never told her what an old horror Miss

Chawcer was? She said a cool good-bye and rushed out to Nerissa, who

was waiting on the doorstep in a fever of nerves in case the man

suddenly appeared.

Gwendolen fell asleep as soon as she was gone. Since her illness she

was finding a rest in the afternoon wasn't good enough;
she needed to

sleep. Dreaming she didn't need but the dream came to
her, sharper and

more vivid than any nighttime episode, apparently real
and happening in

the present. She was young, as she always was in
dreams, and visiting

Christie in Rillington Place. The war was on, the only one
she ever

thought of as "the war," discounting conflicts in Korea and
Suez and the

Falklands and Bosnia and the Persian Gulf. Sirens were
sounding as she

knocked on Christie's door, for in the dream that seemed
real it was she

who was pregnant and she who was going to him for an
abortion. Only,

like Bertha, but there was no Bertha in this reality, she
was afraid of the

man and his instructions and she fled, determined not to
go back. When

she came out, as is the way with dreams, instead of in
Rillington Place

she was with Stephen Reeves in the drawing room at
St. Blaise House

and he was telling her he was the father of her child. It
was a shock to

her, a surprise and a relief. She thought then he would
ask her to marry

him, but the scene shifted again. She was alone in
Ladbroke Grove,

standing outside his surgery in the sudden dusk, and he
was nowhere to

be seen. She was running this way and that, looking for
him, when she

fell over, banged her head, and woke up.

Such daylight dreams take longer to recover from than any nightmare

met with in the hours of darkness. For a moment or two she lay in the

armchair, wondering where he was and when he would come back. She

even looked at her hands and marveled that at her young age they were

so wrinkled, the branching veins standing out like tree roots in dry soil.

Gradually, a reality that was welcome yet unwelcome came back and she

sat up.

While she slept and perhaps while she was talking to Hazel Akwaa, the

brown paper bag containing the thong had slipped down between the seat

cushion and the arm of the armchair. Wide awake now, she had

forgotten it was there.

Chapter 22

Mix left the company for which he had worked for nine years more with a

whimper than a bang. He felt very sore because no one had suggested

buying him a drink, still less had anyone presented him with a clock or a

dinner service, and no noises had been made about redundancy money.

Worst of all he had to hand over the keys to the car, which he had left in

the firm's underground car park.

But he comforted himself with the thought that he had secured undertakings from five of his clients that they would continue

using him to service and repair their machines. Inquiring of a cash

dispenser as to the state of his bank balance, he had been informed he

was nearly five hundred pounds in credit. And that was before the sum

went in which the firm owed him for the three weeks they didn't want

him to work. Still he lacked the heart to go back to Campden Hill Square.

When he did make it down there he'd have no choice but to go on foot. At

any rate, the walk would do him good.

On the Friday he went to the cinema on his own, passing on the way

home pubs whose clientele spilled out onto the pavements and cafes

where diners sat at tables outside. He bought Chinese takeaway for his

supper, two bottles of wine, and a bottle of Cointreau for the making of

Boot Camps. The weather was as hot as it had been in July and as dry.

One afternoon it had rained heavily, the first rain for weeks, and while he

watched it he relished the thought of all that water encouraging weeds to

grow on the garden grave.

Going home was always an ordeal but less so if he could organize

things so as to get back in daylight. That would soon be difficult with

darkness coming earlier and earlier. Carrying his heavy bags, he kept his

eyes fixed straight ahead as he climbed the last flight of stairs, gazing

hypnotically at his own frontdoor. Something had gone wrong with the street lamp immediately outside the house so that no light fell through the Isabella window. The top landing was pitch dark but once inside his flat he was all right. He was safe. And his back didn't hurt anymore. He must be pretty fit to have got over a back injury so fast. He read Killer Extraordinary, watched television to the accompaniment of a Boot Camp, ate his takeaway and listened to the singing and sighing of the Westway. If the police were going to question him about Danila they would have done it by now. Possibly, after years, after old Chawcer was dead, which might be ages away, someone would buy the house and dig up the garden. They wouldn't dig down four feet, would they? By then he'd be long gone and far away from this haunted house. Living with Nerissa, married to Nerissa, and maybe they'd buy a place in France or even Greece. Even if they found Danila's body they'd never connect it with Nerissa Nash's husband, the famous criminologist. Backache woke him in the small hours. It was so bad that he groaned aloud, put the light on and saw it was ten past three. I Just his luck when he'd been congratulating himself on his total recovery. This felt the way they said it did when you slipped a disc. Four ibuprofen and a cup of

neat gin sent him off to sleep again but he woke at seven. No chance of

beginning on his exercise regimen, as he had intended to do today. The

backache felt as if it was there to stay and it was far worse than the last

time. It seemed to affect the whole length of his spine.

A hot bath and two more ibuprofen helped, though he was left feeling

rather dizzy. He took the bus along Westbourne Grove and got off at the

Portobello Market, for food had to be bought. The market was always

crowded, particularly around the stalls, but Saturdays you could only

move by becoming part of the throng and going where it took you. He

bought takeaways and a roast chicken, bread and cakes, his only

concession to what the papers called "healthy food" a bunch of bananas.

Any more and he wouldn't be able to carry it, not with his back in agony

like this.

In a halfhearted attempt to scan the ads for a job to tide him over until

he'd established his own business, he bought an Evening Standard and

walked down to Notting Hill high street to find a pharmacist. More

ibuprofen was needed if sleep weren't to be a problem and he'd better

get something to rub on his back. Outside the big Boots a man was

begging. He was sitting on the pavement with an open biscuit tin in front

of him, but no dog to win sentimental hearts and no sign proclaiming that

he was blind or homeless or had five children. Mix never gave money to

beggars and there were already twenty or so coins in the box, but

something made him look at the man, a sense of familiarity, perhaps a

kind of chemistry between them. He found himself staring into the face of

Reggie Christie. It was him to the life, the clear-cut jaw, the narrow lips,

the bignose, and the glasses over cold eyes.

Mix went quickly into Boots and bought his analgesic. If there had been

another way out he would have taken it but he had to go back into the

high street. The beggar had gone. Mix crossed the road to wait for a bus

that would take him home. There was no sign anywhere of Reggie. Had he

really been there? Had his own mind invented him as a result of thinking

of him so much and of looking at those pictures? And was it the result of

stress? The horrible idea that Reggie's ghost had followed him down here

or had come down, expecting to see him, was too frightening to think of.

Gwendolen had looked everywhere for the object she had come to call "the

thing," "thong" being a word she associated with sandals. Supposing she

must have put it in "a safe place," she investigated, among many other

possibilities, the oven and the space behind the dictionaries in one of the

numerous bookcases. She even unzipped the stomach of the toy spaniel

nightdress case her mother had given her for her twenty-fifth birthday. It

wasn't in any of these potential hiding places. She was irritable with

frustration. How could she take the lodger to task without the thing to

prove her case?

No letter had come from Stephen Reeves. She was sure now that he had

written to her but the letter had gone astray. It was the only explanation.

Before she wrote again she would talk to the lodger. What more likely

than that he had taken her letter, either by mistake or with malice? She

was beginning to think that many of her present problems stemmed from

Cellini. Mysteries and misfortunes had seldom come her way before he

moved in. He had probably infected her with the germ that brought on

her pneumonia.

She meant to catch him when she heard him come down the stairs

preparatory to going out. Or when he entered the house. Her difficulty

was that since her illness she fell asleep far more easily than she used to

do and she was afraid she must have dozed off when last he came in or

left the house. Climbing all fifty-two stairs to his flat was too much for

her at present, though she would have admitted this to no one. Nor would

she have told Olive or Queenie that making her way up to her bed-room

and getting ready for bed exhausted her so enormously that she barely

had the strength to wash her face and hands.

No doubt the lodger did enter the house at some time in the late

morning. She was almost sure she heard his footsteps mounting the

stairs. Would he come down again? She doubted she could tell for she

fell into catnaps throughout the afternoon. Olive came in at about five

but she didn't offer to go up and see if he was at home. She wasn't weak

from illness, Gwendolen thought scornfully, but far too fat.

"You could phone him."

Gwendolen was shocked. "Make a telephone call to someone living in the

same house! O tempora, O mores."

"I don't know what that means, dear. You'll have to speak English."

"It means, a times, a customs. That was my reaction when you

suggested phoning an individual who lives upstairs."

Olive decided. Gwendolen must be exhausted to speak in that

ridiculous way, and offered to make "your evening meal, Gwen." Her

friend's adamant refusal had no effect. She had brought all the materials

for a meal with her."

Not 'meal,' Olive," Gwendolen said feebly. "Please not 'meal.' Dinner-or

supper if you must."

The moment Olive had gone she prepared to go to bed. It took her an

hour to get up there and into her nightgown. The house was silent, more

silent than usual it seemed to her, and not at all warm. The forecast on

her wireless had said it would be a fine day, the temperature in the high

twenties, whatever that meant, and the night exceptionally mild for the

time of year. The wind was supposed to be westerly and therefore warm,

but it felt cold to her as it penetrated ill-fitting windows and plaster

cracks. There were two windows in her bedroom, but from the front one

she could see nothing but darkness and gray branches. The street lamp

had gone out, its glass broken, probably by the thugs with bottles who

roamed the street. Down in the garden, seen from the other window, the

shrubs bent and twisted in the wind and the tree branches swayed this

way and that.

Earlier she had heard Mr. Singh's geese cackling but now they were

quiet, shut up for the night. There was nothing alive in the windswept

garden but Otto sitting on the wall, eating something he had caught

himself. From the window in the darkness, glazed by yellow light,

Gwendolen could just see or divine that he was making his supper off the

pigeon that roosted in the sycamore. She wrapped a thick wool cardigan

about her shoulders, went to bed and fell asleep before she had pulled

the bedclothes up to cover her.

Sunday had meant nothing to Mix since the death of his grandmother.

Now it was just a pallid version of Saturday, rather unpleasant and

irritating because some of the shops were shut, streets were empty, and

men who had girlfriends or wives or families took them out in cars. Still,

it was also the day he had resolved to renew his campaign of really

getting to know Nerissa. He hadn't yet got used to being without a car

and, as he had yesterday, he went downstairs at nine-thirty and

sauntered outside to begin the drive to Campden Hill Square. No car, and

then he remembered what had happened to it, cursing groundly. Heavy

doses of ibuprofen had numbed his back and he set off to walk.

The wind was cooler this morning. Autumn was coming. Being used to

the warm interior of a vehicle, he was inadequately dressed in a T-shirt

and he shivered as he walked. As he approached her house he saw that

the Jaguar was on the front drive and his spirits rose. He had forgotten to

supply himself with something to take to her door, a campaign leaflet or

an envelope to be filled for a children's charity, so all he could do was wait

and trust to the inspiration of the moment.

He began to shiver and goose pimples came up on his arms. To warm

himself up, he marched to the bottom of the hill, along Holland Park

Avenue and up the other side of the square. He was breathless when he

got back to the top but no warmer. To his horror, he saw the Jaguar

reversing out of the drive. He had missed her.

She drove past him down the hill and though he waved, she couldn't

have seen him. She kept looking straight ahead and gave him no

answering smile. There was nothing for it but to make his way back

home and nothing to do when he got there but rub the stuff he had

bought on his back and write applications to the two jobs he had seen in

the Evening Standard, both of which looked likelier than the others.

The lodger had lived in her house for nearly four months now and

sometimes weeks had passed without her seeing him or wanting to see

him. They had spoken only when they encountered each other by chance

and then not for long. He was another kind of person, she had told

herself, and no doubt she was not his. Therefore she found it strange

how much she now needed to see him. It seemed to her essential that at

some point during this Sunday she should confront him and have out

with him this business of the thing and the missing letter. There was

also the matter of his failure, according to Queenie and Olive, to feed

Otto in her absence. Her own indifference to Otto was not the question. It

had been Cellini's duty to feed the cat, he had promised. Besides, she

was sure Otto would never have killed and eaten those guinea fowl and

that pigeon if he had been properly fed.

Thinking of the guinea fowl reminded her that Mr. Singh was due to

call on her at 11 A. M. She was so sure he would be late, everyone always

was these days, that she was astonished and nearly disbelieving when the

doorbell rang promptly on the hour. When she got to her feet she felt so

dizzy she had to grab hold of the back of the sofa so it took her a few

minutes to get to the door; he rang again, which gave her an excuse to be

irritable.

"All right, all right, I'm coming," she said to the empty hallway.

He was a handsome man, taller and paler than she had expected, with

a small iron-gray mustache and instead of the anticipated nightshirt-like garment, he wore gray flannel trousers, a sports jacket, and a pink

shirt with a gray and pink tie. The only incongruous note (to

Gwendolen's eyes) was his snowwhite intricately wound turban.

He followed her into the drawing room, patiently walking at her own

slow pace. "It is a fine place you have here," he said.

Gwendolen nodded. She knew it. That was why she stayed. She sat

down and motioned to him to do the same. Siddhartha Singh did so, but

slowly. He was looking around, carefully taking in the spaces and

corners, the peeling walls and cracked ceiling, the shaky and splintered

window frames, the prototype radiators dating from the twenties, and the

carpets, one piled on another, all eaten by moths and apparently chewed

by smallmammals. Only in the slums of Calcutta, years ago, had he seen

such a degree of disintegration.

"If it is about your birds," Gwendolen began, "I really don't know what

I'm supposed ... "

"Excuse me, madam." Mr. Singh spoke very politely. "Excuse me, but

the bird episode is a thing of the past. History, if I may so put it. I cut my

losses and turn over a new leaf. And on this subject, perhaps you,

obviously an English lady; can tell me why 'leaf.' Is it perhaps that we go

out into the woods and turn over a leaf to discover a secret beneath?"

Gwendolen would, in normal circumstances, have made a withering

rejoinder but this man was so good-looking (and not just for an Oriental)

and so charming that she felt quite weak in his presence. Like the Queen

of Sheba when confronted by Solomon, there was no more spirit in her:"

" 'Leaf' means a page," she said unsteadily. "A page in the well, the book of life, I suppose."

Mr. Singh smiled. It was just such a smile as the sun god might bestow,

broad, benign, lighting his whole handsome face and displaying the kind

of teeth possessed by American adolescents, shiny, white, and even.

"Thank you. Sometimes, although I have been in this country for thirty

years, I feel I dwell in a new age of enlightenment."

Gwendolen smiled back helplessly. She made an offer the like of which

she hadn't extended to a casual visitor since Stephen Reeves disappeared

from her life. "Would you likesome tea?"

"Oh, no, thank you. I am here only for a jiffy. Let me come to the point.

While you were unwell and not in residence, I see your gardener working

away, a most industrious young man, and I say to Mrs. Singh, look, this

young man is just what we need to set things to rights here. And that is

why I come to you. For the name and, please, the telephone number of

your gardener, in the hope that he requires more work."

Various emotions fought each other. in Gwendolen's head. She hardly

knew why she had felt a sinking of the heart when a Mrs. Singh was

mentioned, though she could understand the astonishment and incipient

anger that rose in her at the same time. She sat up straighter, wondering

fleetingly if he might take her for ten years younger than she actually

was and said, "I haven't got a gardener."

"Oh, yes, indeed, madam. You have. Perhaps it has slipped your mind. I

understand you have been indisposed and in a hospital. That was when

he was here. No doubt you engaged him and he came to begin the work

in your absence."

"I did not engage him. I know nothing about it." Impossible to delude

herself. He was looking at her pityingly as if he saw her not as ten years

her own junior but as an old woman suffering from senile dementia.

"What did he look like?" she asked him.

"Let me see. About thirty years old, fairish hair, a British face, blue

eyes, I think, and handsome. Not as tall as I or"--he sized her up

critically--"as you, I would respectfully say, madam."

"What exactly was he doing?"

"Digging the garden," said Mr. Singh simply. "He dug in two places. The

ground, you know, is very heavy, like rock, like"--he ventured a flight of

fancy--"adamantine stone."

He even spoke, she thought, the same language as she did. If she had

known him sooner, would he have replaced Stephen Reeves in her

affections? "The man you're talking about," she said, her anger surfacing

again, "is my lodger. He lives upstairs, on the top floor."

"Then I apologize for troubling you."

Mr. Singh got to his feet, affording Gwendolen another sight of his tall

soldierly figure, his height, and the boardlike flatness of his stomach.

She wanted to cry, "Don't go!" Instead she said, "His name is Cellini and

he is not permitted access to my garden."

Another smile, but sad this time. "I won't say I'm not disappointed. No,

please don't get up. You are a convalescent lady and not, if I may say so,

quite in the first youth." He caught sight of himself in one of Gwendolen's

many fly-spotted, desilvered mirrors. "Who is?" he said more tactfully.

"Now I say good morning, thank you for your trouble and I let myself out."

With his departure the sun went in. Anger remained, hotter than

before. She would lie in wait for Cellini now, drink black coffee, do

anything to stay awake until she heard him come in. The thing, the

letter, and now this, she thought. She'd get rid of him and find a nice

quiet lady, not in the first youth. Oh, the hurt the phrase had done her!

Even though he bracketed himself with her in that category. But Cellini.

She would evict Cellini just as soon as she could.

Chapter 23

He had begun to walk home, but when he was passing a bus stop and a

bus came, he got on it. It was too wild a day for a walk to be enjoyable. A

few yellow leaves were already falling from the plane trees, whirling past

the windows of the bus. Something seemed to be pinching his spine with

iron fingers and whatever it was stabbed his lumbar region as he was

getting off on the corner of St. Mark's Road. The rest of the way he had to

go on foot, the pain subsiding a little with enforced movement.

Cars were as usual parked nose to tail all along the residents' parking

in St. Blaise Avenue, and he noticed what he had had no need to notice

before. One of them, an ancient Volvo, had a For Sale sign in its

windscreen and underneath, the price: £300. Volvos were good cars,

supposed to last for years, and this one appeared quite well cared for. He

was walking round it, looking in the windows, when a woman emerged

from one of the houses on the St. Blaise House side and came up to him.

"Are you interested?"

Mix said he didn't know, he might be. Though no longer young, she was

quite good-looking with the kind of hourglass figure he liked.

"It's my husband's. We're called Brunswick-Brian and Sue Brunswick.

Brian's away but he'll be back on Wednesday. He'd go with you on a trial

run if you'd like ."

"You're not a driver yourself?" He wouldn't have minded going on any

sort of trial run with her.

"I'm afraid it's years since I was at the wheel of a car."

"Shame," said Mix. "I'll think about it."

Padding across the hallway in St. Blaise House, his hand pressed to the

small of his back, he noticed that the drawing room door was ajar and he

peered in. Old Chawcer was lying on the sofa fast asleep. He began to

climb the stairs. Though cold in comparison to what it had been, the

weather was brighter and the sun had come out. Sunbeams striking the

walls of the stairwell showed up every crack, hairline as well as wide, the

flyspots on the crookedly hung pictures and the flies that had got in

between the print and the glass and died there, the cobwebs that clung

to frames and cords and light fittings. He wondered where Reggie's ghost

went in the daytime and told himself not to think about it unless he had

to. The pain in his lumbar region sharpened. If it didn't improve he'd

have to go to the doctor.

The first thing Gwendolen thought of when she woke up was Mr. Singh's

revelation. Mr. Singh himself was not for her and she knew it, while

Stephen Reeves was. Momentarily she had been carried away by his

looks and his charm but, anyway, she didn't approve of cross-cultural

marriages--miscegenation, they had called it when she was young--and

the wife was a considerable stumbling block. The unknown and unseen

Mrs. Singh she dismissed as a "tottering native woman in a veil." What

Mr. Singh had told her now excluded almost everything else from her mind.

While she was absent, and not only absent but ill in the hospital, that

man, that lodger, had been in her garden, twice been there, and dug

holes in the flowerbeds. Once upon a time, in the days of Chawcer

prosperity, a real gardener had attended to horticultural matters, the

beds had blossomed with lupins and delphiniums, zinnias and dahlias,

the shrubs had been trimmed and the lawn mown to a velvet carpetlike

texture. To some extent Gwendolen saw it like that still, or she saw it as

allowed to grow a little shabby, but nothing that a handyman and a

lawnmower wouldn't set to rights in an hour or so. And into this small

paradise the lodger had ventured with a spade--almost certainly her

spade-and dug holes. He had gone into the garden and dug holes without

her permission, without even attempting to get her permission, and in

order to do so must have passed through her kitchen, her washhouse,

probably depositing the thing in the copper on his way. Why had he? To

bury something, of course. Possibly, no, probably, he had stolen

something of hers, something valuable, and buried it out there until he

could find a receiver of stolen goods. She would have to go all over the

house, finding out what was missing. Rage returned, banging in her

blood vessels. It was no wonder that, now she was wide awake, she felt

distinctly strange, her head swimming and her body very weak.

For all that, she would very likely have attempted the stairs, taking them

slowly and with rests at every landing, but for Queenie "Winthrop

arriving as she was making up her mind. She heard the door open,

hoped it might be the lodger to save her climbing fifty-two stairs, and had

her hopes dashed by Queenie's voice calling, "Yoo-hoo, it's only me."

Gwendolen wondered how long they were going to keep this up, she and

Olive, calling on her with presents every day. For weeks perhaps, for

months. Forever? She didn't want any more chocolates, cereal bars,

pears, or grapes. The bottle of port Queenie took out of her shopping

trolley was far more acceptable and Gwendolen, cheering up, actually

thanked her friend.

"I hope I'm not becoming an alcoholic," she said. "I'm sure I would if you

and Olive had your way. Of course it's my lodger who has driven me to it.

I never used to drink anything stronger than orange juice."

She had been going to tell Queenie about the encounter with Mr. Singh

and what he had unwittingly revealed to her. But somehow she didn't

want to discuss her neighbor with Queenie or anyone else and she

couldn't describe the lodger's crimes without involving Mr. Singh. Instead

she said, "I really don't like to ask. It's something of an imposition. But

could you bring yourself to go upstairs and knock on his door and tell

him I would like to see him this evening at six? Please," she said, though it

went against the grain. "I have several matters I must bring up with

him."

"Well, dear, I will if you don't mind waiting a bit. I've still got to catch

my breath after walking all the way here. I waited and waited for a bus

but it never came. I'll go up before I go. I promise. Now shall I get you

something to eat?" Queenie looked longingly at the bottle. "Or a drink?"

"Ye could both have a small glass of port."

"We could, couldn't we? After all, it's Sunday."

"Surely it's communion wine one drinks on a Sunday, not port."

"Possibly, dear, but not being a churchgoer I wouldn't know. Shall I be mother?"

Gwendolen shuddered. "It's fortified wine, Queenie, not tea."

She thought this habit of bringing a present to a sick friend and then

expecting to share it, deplorable. But even a lifetime of rudeness hadn't

taught her to drink exclusively in front of someone else. She watched

Queenie pouring measures she considered too liberal into the wrong sort

of glasses, raised hers and said what the professor used to say in like

circumstances, "Your health!"

A snack of cheese and biscuits, fruit, and a slice each of the carrot

cake, an offering from Queenie's elder daughter, was eaten off trays laid

with ancient yellowing lace-trimmed cloths found in a sideboard drawer.

"You look as if you might drop off to sleep at any moment," Queenie said.

"The thing isn't the only matter I have to complain to the lodger about,"

said Gwendolen as if she hadn't spoken. "I was expecting a very

important letter while I was in hospital. It should have come here and

apparently it didn't." She had no intention of disclosing much about the

nature of this letter or its sender to Queenie. "I suspect Cellini of

tampering with it. "She had long dropped the "Mr." "Unless you or Olive

have been interfering with my post, which," she added in a

more conciliatory tone, "seems unlikely."

"Of course we didn't, dear. Where would this letter have come from?"

"The postmark would probably be Oxford. And now I really do want to

sleep so perhaps you'd go upstairs to the lodger. Six o'clock he's to

present himself."

Queenie lumbered up the stairs, looking longingly at the telephone as

she passed it. But she would only have had to lift the receiver for

Gwendolen to hear it and be down upon her like a ton of bricks. For all

her seniority, Gwendolen had better hearing than she had. On the first

landing she removed her punishing high-heeled shoes and, taking deep

breaths, struggled on, shoes in hand. If he wasn't in she'd have

something to say to Gwendolen. Her friend needn't think she had a

prerogative in rudeness. Two could play at that game.

He was in. He came to the door with a cardigan tied round his shoulders

and his feet bare. "Oh, hi. What is it?"

Ever since she was fifteen Queenie had believed, and acted according to

her belief, that if you want anything out of a man, if you simply want to

exist in his presence, you must be extravagantly polite, sweet, winning,

and even flirtatious. It hadn't contributed to her comfort, but to the

happiness of her marriage it had. "Oh, Mr. Cellini, I'm so sorry to bother

you and on a Sunday too, but Miss Chawcer says will you be an angel

and give her just five minutes of your time at about six o'clock this

evening. If you'd just pop down and have a word with her. I'm sure she

won't keep you, so if you could ... "

"What's it about?" "

"She didn't say." Queenie flashed him an enormous toothy smile of the

kind some man had once told her lit up her whole face, and proceeded to

run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. "You know what she is, Mr.

Cellini," she said, betraying Gwendolen without knowing she was doing

so, "awfully fussy about every little thing. Not that you'd think so, would

you, from the state of this house?"

"Too right." Mix wanted to get back to the video he'd made a couple of

weeks back of Man U playing some Central European team. "Tell her I'll

be there around six. Cheers, then."

When she got back to the drawing room Gwendolen was asleep. She

wrote on a scrap of paper. Mr. Cellini will come at six. Love, Queenie.

Up in the top flat the football remained unwatched. Taking the message

without much thought; Mix had gone back inside and become an

immediate prey to misgivings. She must have found the thong, he

thought. Someone had and who more likely than old Chawcer? He must

think up some reason for its being in the copper and the only one he

could think of, that he had been doing a girlfriend's washing because her

machine had broken down, was obviously not feasible. Who washed in

antiquated holes like that anymore? What was wrong with the

launderette? Anyway, it wouldn't account for the fact that he shouldn't

have been in her washhouse.

Perhaps he could deny all knowledge of it. That might be best. Even

better, if he could manage it, would be to suggest Ma Fordyce or Ma

"Winthrop had something to do with it. He could even say he'd seen one

of them with the thong in his hand. Don't worry about it, he said to

himself, don't even think about it. Think about something else. Like

what? That Frank from the Sun in Splendour might be with the police at

this moment? That Nerissa was out with another bloke? No, think about

the possibility of offering Brian Brunswick two-fifty for the Volvo. Why

shouldn't he go back to the house tomorrow and ask Sue Brunswick to

come out in the car with him? She didn't have to be a driver, she only

had to sit beside him. That would be brilliant. He could drive her down to

Holland Parkor, better still, to Richmond and suggest they had lunch in

oneof those trendy pubs. She couldn't refuse, not if she wanted to sell

her car. Then, afterward, with the old man, this Brian, out of the

way,when they got back to her place ...

It would probably be a one-off and just as well. Once he'd got inside

Nerissa's house and talked to her over coffee he wouldn't need secondrate women like Sue Brunswick or secondhand cars, he'd have the

Jaguar and, above all, he'd have Nerissa. By next Sunday his whole

circumstances could have changed. He wouldn't even be here in this flat,

attractive as itwas, he'd be moving into Campden Hill Square, he

wouldn't need a job or a car or care about what a bunch of old women

thought of him. There'd be no murderer's ghost in her house. He'd tell

her about the thong and they'd have a good laugh over it together,

especially the bit about when he'd told old Chawcer the thong belonged

to Ma "Winthrop. As if she couldeven begin to get it round her fat arse!

He took three 400 milligram strength ibuprofen, put socks and shoes

on and his arms into the cardigan sleeves and went down at ten past six.

Gwendolen wasn't lying down, she wasn't even sitting down, but pacing

the room because the lodger was over ten minutes late. When he

appeared, she was so angry she couldn't control herself.

"You're late. Doesn't time mean anything to people anymore?"

"What was it you wanted?"

"You'd better sit down," said Gwendolen.

Was it a fact that anger made your blood pressure rise and that you

could feel it rise, pounding in your head? Sometimes she thought about

her arteries, lined as they must be by now with stuff like the plaque you

got on your teeth. Her head swam. She had to sit down, though she

would have preferred to stand and tower over him. But she was afraid of

falling and thus making herself vulnerable in his presence.

"A very charming neighbor of mine called on me this morning," she said,

taking a deep breath. "These immigrants to our shores could teach some

people around here what good manners are. However, be that as it may,

he had something to tell me. Possibly you can guess what it was."

Mix could. Though he had been turning over in his mind possible

reasons for old Chawcer wanting to see him, this wasn't one of them. He

had no explanation to offer. "With increasing dismay, he listened to her

long account of Mr. Singh's visit, his misapprehension as to Mix's

presence in the garden and her own indignation.

"Now perhaps you'll tell me what you thought you were doing."

"Digging the garden," said Mix. "You can't say it doesn't need it."

"That's no business of yours. The garden has nothing to do with you."

Gwendolen had decided not to mention the thing. The letter was another

matter. "And I've reason to believe you've been tampering with my post."

"That's a lie, for a start."

"Don't speak to me like that, Mr. Cellini. How dare you suggest I might

be untruthful? You still haven't given me any reason for digging up my

garden, not to mention going into my kitchen and my washhouse."

There had been a teacher like her at his comprehensive school. He even

remembered her name: Miss Forester. She'd taught his mum before him

and his grandma too, for all he knew. But his generation of kids gave her

a hard time and she'd had to leave before she had a nervous breakdown.

He'd been one of them but in those days he'd had nothing to lose. This

was different. He'd like to have said what he remembered saying to Miss

Forester but somehow the words, "Piss off, you oldcow," died on his lips.

"Either I get a satisfactory explanation of your conduct or I shall serve

you notice to quit the premises."

"You can't do that," he said. "It's an unfurnished flat. I've got a

protected tenancy."

Gwendolen knew that very well, iniquitous though it was, but she had

still tried it on. "What did you bury? Some piece of property of mine, I

suppose. A valuable piece of jewelry? Or perhaps the silver? I shall

check, have no fear, I shall make an inventory of missing things. Or

maybe you murdered someone and buried the body. Is that it?"

The stain on the base of the Psyche notwithstanding, Gwendolen didn't

for a moment believe this was what had happened. It was the stuff of

fiction and as such something she had read of many times over the years.

She said it, not because she gave it credence or even saw it as remotely

likely, but to insult him. She even failed to notice that Mix had gone

white, his expressionless face no longer blank. But he said nothing, only

lowering the eyes that had been fixed on hers.

Triumphantly, she saw that she had utterly vanquished him and now

she would finish the job. "Tomorrow morning, without fail, I shall inform

the police. When you come out of prison I doubt if you will wish to

return--here even if that be allowed."

"Have you finished?" Mix asked.

"Almost," said Gwendolen. "I simply repeat that I shall inform the police

of your activities tomorrow morning."

When he had gone she had to lie down. Once she heard his door close-he slammed it and the whole house seemed to shake--she hauled herself

off the sofa and began to crawl toward the stairs. Later on, she might

lack the strength to manage them as she lacked it now to begin the climb.

For about ten minutes she remained sitting on the floor and then she

started to crawl up the stairs on hands and knees. It seemed like hours

later that she reached her bedroom and got inside.

Heaven forbid that she should have her bed moved downstairs. Neither

Queenie nor Olive had yet suggested it, but they would, they would. She

would never submit to that, she thought, as she struggled, and failed, to

remove her clothes and get into her nightgown. She did manage to take

off the ruby ring and put it in the jewel box, thought of washing her

hands but only thought of it. Reaching the bathroom seemed as

impossible as, say, walking to Ladbroke Grove and back. She lay down

and closed her eyes. Weakness enfeebled her whole body, but sleep,

which had come so easily and irresistibly during the past week, come

when she didn't want it and even tried to fight against it, now backed

away from her, banished by anger.

It wasn't only the wrath aroused by the lodger's behavior,
though that
was bad enough, but the rage of a lifetime welling up and
bubbling,
churning through her veins. Rage at Mama, who had
taught her to be
ladylike at the expense of freedom of speech, cultivation
of the mind,
liberty of movement, love, passion ,adventure, and the
pursuit of
happiness; rage at Papa who hid his denial to her of a
real education
under a cloak of protecting her from the wicked world
and who kept her
at home to be his nurse and amanuensis; rage at Stephen
Reeves,
who had deceived her and married someone else and
failed to answer her
letters; rage at this enormous decaying house that had
become her
prison.
For a long while, she didn't know how long, she felt she
had no physical
existence and was only a mind that swirled with rage and
thoughts of
revenge. Then, at one moment she was in a fury of
anger, at the next
blank and still. It was like sleep and yet it was not. Her
first thought
when she emerged from it was that at least she could
punish the lodger
with the police. She struggled, and failed, to sit up. This
wouldn't do for,
tonight certainly, she must check on the rest of the
jewelry in the box, see

what, if anything, was missing and lying in a muddy hole in the garden.

She must go down and look in the cabinet where the silver, untouched

for many years, lay wrapped in green baize.

It seemed as if, for a few moments, she had lost consciousness. She

doubted if she could stand up. This time it wasn't a fear of dizziness that

might cause her to fall but an apparent inability to move her left side.

Cramp, of course. She occasionally suffered from cramp and usually in

the night. She rubbed her left leg and then her left arm and though she

fancied a little feeling returned she could only put her foot to the floor by

a huge effort. Her arm hung useless. As she thought she must try to get

to the light switch and the door, it opened slowly and Otto strolled in. His

sleek chocolate form became black in the faint light from those street

lamps still in working order, while his eyes glowed the color of the limes

for sale in the corner shop. She found herself thinking, incongruously, as

she had never thought before, that his eyes were beautiful and that he,

young and lithe, was the only perfect thing she ever saw. He took no

notice of her but sat down in front of the empty grate and began picking

pieces of twig and tiny stones out of his pads with sharp white teeth.

Gwendolen dragged her left leg back onto the bed, tugging it there with her right hand. The effort exhausted her. His manicure complete, Otto leapt gracefully onto the bed and curled up beside her feet.

Chapter 24

From his bedroom window Mix watched Mr. Singh pinning up fairy lights

along the fronds of the palm tree. It wasn't Christmas or that festival

Indians had about the same time, so what was he playing at? Maybe it's

just as well we can't have handguns here like they do in the U.S. If I had

a gun I'd shoot that guy here and now, Mix thought. Mr. Singh climbed

down the ladder, went into the house, and switched the lights on, red and

blue and yellow and green twinkling in the exotic tree. Then Mrs. Singh

came out in a pink sari, and the two of them stood looking at the tree,

admiring the effect.

Even at this hour, the places where Mix had dug the garden showed up

quite clearly from a distance, a small patch of turned earth and a larger

one. He should have done his digging under cover of darkness, he knew

that now, but that would have meant after midnight. Lights were on in

the houses along Mr. Singh's road but on this side he couldn't see the

backs of the terrace, only their gardens. One of them had outside lights

along the wall and among the evergreens. A woman who
had come out to

take in a blanket and a pair of jeans from the washingline
he recognized

as Sue Brunswick. Thoughts of buying! her husband's car
now seemed

like a half-forgotten dream, let alone the designs he had
had on her.

Even Nerissa, whom he often thought of romantically at
this time of day

like a song at twilight, faded from his mind. Nothing
mattered, not jobs

or livelihood, not lack of a car, not love, nothing but
stopping old

Chawcer phoning the police.

Yet ever since he had come upstairs he had been
paralyzed with fear.

The ibuprofen he had taken, far in excess of the
maximum recommended

dose, made his head swim and hadn't done much for his
backache. He

hadn't even been able to pour himself a drink or think
about food or sit

down, but had stood here at the window, holding on to
the sill for support

and staring out. She would do it, he was sure of that. He
hadn't tried to

dissuade her because he knew for certain that she'd do
it. She only put it

off till tomorrow because she belonged to that generation
who thought

you didn't phone the police or a doctor or go to the shops
on a Sunday.

His gran was the same. They saw Monday as the day you
got down to

things, so she'd tell them first thing in the morning.

The twin gleams of Otto's eyes were nowhere to be seen. Mix, who had never given Otto much thought before, now imagined how glorious it must be to be him, fed and housed for free, no job and none needed, insomnia unknown, freedom to wander a rich hunting ground all day and night if he wished. Free of pain, supple and fearless and free to murder anything that got in his way. No sex of course. Otto, he was sure, had been fixed. But sex was a nuisance anyway, and what you'd never had you couldn't miss.

This small distraction from his troubles sent Mix into the living room where he mixed himself a Boot Camp with an extra shot of Cointreau. He should have had the sense to do this a couple of hours ago. Then maybe he wouldn't have felt so bad. The cocktail had its wondrous effect and almost instantly made him feel there was no problem he couldn't solve.

You had to get things in perspective, you had to know your priorities. His priority, in the here and now, was to stop old Chawcer talking to the police. It was probable, he thought, that she didn't know the effect her words would have on them. He knew. Searching for Danila's body simultaneously with their hunt for her killer, they would immediately be

alerted to the chance of discovering both and be around here in ten

minutes. She had to be stopped.

He knew how to stop a woman's tongue. He had done it before.

How she got out of bed Gwendolen hardly knew. She crawled a few

inches across the floor. In Mr. Singh's garden a palm tree had turned

into a chandelier of colored lights. She must be imagining it, something

had happened to her brain. To reach the door, let alone the stairs, the

drawing room, and the silver cabinet, was impossible. She would have

liked to phone her doctor or even Queenie or Olive, but she would have

had to roll herself down the stairs to do so. But it was Sunday, still

Sunday as far as she knew, and angry as she had been with her longdead mother, Mrs. Chawcer's principle of not making a phone call to

anyone but members of one's family on a Sunday--and never, on any

day, after nine at night--died very hard. So she crawled back without the

strength to wash or what her mother had called "relieve herself," saw that

the imaginary tree was still there, still bright with twinkling colored

stars, and fell on the bed still fully clothed, though she managed to pull

off one shoe and kick off the other.

Lying there on her back, she pulled the quilt over her with her sound

right hand. What was wrong with her she guessed, and had done so for

the past hour, but only now could she put it into silent words. She had

had a stroke.

Mix had come out onto the landing because she made such a noise

getting out of bed. What was wrong with her? Perhaps she always made

that much noise about going to bed. He wouldn't know. He never

remembered noticing her bedtime before.

He asked himself if he'd be able to kill her in cold blood. Danila had

been different. Danila had driven him into an uncontrollable rage with her

insults and her unprovoked attack on Nerissa. The light on the landing

went out and the Isabella lights had disappeared while the street lamp

was out of order. Once I'm alone here, he thought, I'm going to get all the

lights in the place changed so that they stay on longer and I'm going to

buy normal-size bulbs for them, hundreds or hundred and fifties, not

this rubbish. It won't be for long, I'll soon be gone.

He looked across to the thin shaft of light coming from his lightly open

front door, then, his eyes becoming used to the dark, along the left-hand

passage. A figure was walking silently away with his back to Mix, as if he

had come out of the nearest room. He turned as he reached the farthest

door, saw him and grew still. Mix saw the gleam on the glasses on his

beaky nose. Then the ghost lifted his shoulders in a small shrug. He put

out his hands in the sort of gesture that indicates doubt or despair, and

his lips parted. No sound came from them. Mix shut his eyes and when

he opened them the ghost was gone.

The fear he usually felt seemed to have been partly banished by the

greater terror of the police. He remained where he was, staring at the

place where the ghost had been. The shrug had meant something. The

ghost had been trying to tell him something. Perhaps it had been

advising him to do what he had almost decided on. He, Reggie, had killed

six women and been not much fazed by it. No one knew why he'd killed

his own wife, but opinion was that she had found out about his murders

and not only refused to protect him but threatened to do just what old

Chawcer was doing to him. So was that what his ghost had been saying?

Kill her. I never thought twice about it. Kill her and do what I did with

Ethel.

**

Thoughts had begun to run out of Gwendolen's head, leaving it almost

empty. Stephen Reeves appeared fleetingly before vanishing down a long

road where those thoughts ran and where in the distance, on the edge of

something indefinable, she could make out misty shapes who might or

might not be Papa and Mama. Gradually they too faded and slipped

over that edge where Stephen had gone. She was alone in the world but

there was nothing unusual in that. She had always been alone. And now,

as something rumbled and murmured inside the place where thoughts

had been, she knew she was going out of the world alone. For no reason,

with no particular desire, she told her hands and her arms to move, but

they no longer obeyed her and she was too tired to tell them again. She

breathed very slowly, in and out, in and after a long time out, in again

very lightly and out on a long rattling sigh. If there had been watchers

they would have waited for the next inhalation and when none came,

have risen from their chairs, closed her eyes, and drawn the sheet up

over her face.

Bright moonlight poured into the bedroom. When she came to bed

Gwendolen had been too ill and too tired to draw the curtains, and in the

four hours that had passed, an almost full moon had mounted into the

clear sky. Because of the position of the large double bed and the height

and width of the window, the moon between the half-open curtains

spread a pale band across the bedclothes, a stripe of whiteness, leaving

her face in the dark. Earlier than usual, the lights in Mr. Singh's house

had gone out and the fairy light tree was also in darkness.

To his dismay Mix found himself trembling as he came into the

bedroom, not from the temperature but from fear. Yet what was there to

be afraid of? This time the ghost hadn't even made him shiver. All the

doors downstairs were locked and, where this was possible, bolted. He

and she were alone. The ghost was upstairs of course but Mix had felt

and still felt that Reggie approved of what he was about to do. And,

mystifyingly, the pain in his back had gone. He had taken no more

ibuprofen, yet it was gone. He'd be all right now.

As he approached the bed a black shape uncurled itself and reared up,

arching its back. The green eyes seemed larger and brighter than usual.

"I'll kill you too," said Mix.

He made a lunge for Otto who eluded his grasp with ease, hissed like a

snake, and leapt for the open door and the stairs. The woman on the bed

was perfectly still. Do it quickly, he said to himself, do it now. Don't look

at her. Just do it. Her head was on one pillow and there was another

beside her, a third up-ended against the bedhead. He took hold of the

up-ended pillow in both trembling hands and turning his head away,

pressed it down on her face as hard as he could.

She didn't move. There was to be no struggle. She remained utterly still.

He held his hands there and they steadied while he counted to a

hundred, two hundred ... At five hundred he let his hands relax and as

they did so his fingers touched the skin of her neck. It was icy cold. He

had never before touched such an old person--his grandmother had died

at seventy--and he wondered if all of them were as cold as that, the heat

in the blood, the warm life, cooling gradually with age.

He put the pillow back where he had found it and pulled the bedclothes

off her body. It surprised him to see that she was fully dressed. Maybe

she always went to bed like that, never took her clothes off. He stripped

the top sheet out from under the coverlet and blanket and began to roll

the body up in it. By now he had some experience of this sort of thing, he

was less fearful and less clumsy. The trembling that he couldn't

account for had entirely ceased. He felt very calm and resigned. He

had had to do it. Before he wound the end of the sheet around her head

and face he made himself look. Her wide-open eyes reminded him of

Danila's. But Danila's had been young and clear, her body warm to

touch. These eyes, rheumy, clouded, lay in a nest of wrinkles. And this old

woman was ice-cold.

She was much heavier than Danila and it took him a long time to drag

her up the stairs to the top, the body bumping on every step. He

expected renewed back pain but there was none. Once the body was

inside his flat and he had had a drink, a fairly stiff gin, he went back to

her bedroom and tidied the bed, making it look as he thought she might

have made it, in a rather slovenly way. Her shoes, which she must have

kicked off before lying down, he put into the cupboard to join the

jumble of ready there. He was going to tell those who inquired that she

had decided to go away and convalesce, leaving everything the way she

would if she had really gone.

All the time he was dragging her upstairs he was thinking he might

injure his back again, but he was quite free of pain. And somehow he

knew he would continue to be unless it came on later, as it had done last

time. At the trial of Timothy Evans, Reggie had made the court believe he

couldn't have killed Evans's wife because his back was too bad for him to

lift her. I won't be going near any court, Mix told himself resolutely. I got

rid of her to keep myself out of court.

He went downstairs and drew back the bolts on the front door in case

Ma Winthrop or Ma Fordyce decided to come every early in the morning

and thought it was funny the door being bolted. He didn't want anyone

thinking anything was funny. This house was a dreadful place at night,

such a place as shouldn't be allowed to exist, he thought. Living here for

long would drive you mad. You'd feel it was moldering away and slowly

rotting around you, the wood and the hangings and the ancient carpets

disintegrating hour by hour, minute by minute. If you stood still and

listened you could almost hear it, tiny drippings and droppings, moths

chewing, flakes falling, splinters, rust, and mildew turning to dust. Why

had he ever thought he wanted to live here? Why had he spent all that

money on making a small part of the house fit to live in?

Returning to the stairs, he saw Otto above him sitting on the first

landing. Had she fed the cat? She would always do that before she went

to bed and would have done so before she left in the morning on this

journey she was supposed to be going on. He went back to look in case

one of those two old women checked and found it funny the cat's plate

being empty. Either Otto had eaten it or none had been put down. Mix

opened a can and filled the plate.

"I'd put poison in it if I'd got any," he said aloud.

Otto came down the stairs, Mix aimed a kick at him, but the cat sprang,

raking claws down his bare ankle. Mix cried out, reached for his leg, and

brought his hand away covered in blood. He cursed, peering through the

moonlit dark for that shape and those eyes, but Otto had disappeared,

leaving the food uneaten.

Mix followed, dripping blood. The moonlight came in everywhere it

could find an uncurtained window or a crack between door and jamb,

scattering spots and lines of white light. The landing windows let it in

and it seeped through her bedroom door, which he had left ajar. Above

him he saw Otto padding up the tiled flight. At the top, without

hesitation, moving through a big square of moonlight, the cat turned left

along the passage. When Mix got up there he was nowhere to be seen.

Like some witch's familiar, he had disappeared into the ghost's abode.

There Mix was too frightened to follow him.

He thought of searching once more for Gwendolen's sleeping pills but

he was afraid. Such fear was irrational, he knew, as was the horrible

fantasy he had of sleeping for too long and deeply until he awoke blearily

to find police in the flat, the front door kicked in and Ma Fordyce

unwrapping the bundle in which was Gwendolen's body.
He must stay
alert, lie down, and rest but not sleep. He had things to do
in the morning
that couldn't wait.

Queenie had been invited to a Fordyce-Akwaa family
brunch. She thought

it extraordinarily nice of them to ask her because her
company would

consist of Olive, her sister, her niece Hazel, and Hazel's
two sons with

their wives and two babies; she would be the only
outsider. Gwendolen

also had been invited but she had refused, as Olive--this
was perhaps the

reason she had been so anxious to ask her--had known
she would.

Gwendolen was difficult. Everyone who came into contact
with her

knew that, but you had to make allowances for her age,
ten years older

than Queenie herself, and her single status. It was a well-
known fact that

being single all those years made you selfish. Queenie
and Olive often

discussed Gwendolen's rudeness and "contrariness" but
agreed that they

must put up with it and not consider withdrawing their
friendship. They

were also in agreement that it was unthinkable for her, in
her present

state, to be left alone for more than a few hours. Queenie
should be the

one to call at St. Blaise House in the morning while Olive
would try to

look in later, as she would be busy before that with the brunch.

Nine o'clock was early, but she couldn't help that. She had things to do

before she went round to Olive's. Still outstanding was the vexed

question of what she was going to wear. The pink dress or the new white

trouser suit she had been lucky to get in a size 18?

Gwendolen was probably still in bed. Queenie let herself into the house,

calling, "Yoo-hoo" as she always did because she didn't want to startle her

friend. She looked first of all into the drawing room. The bottle of port

was still on the table and so were their two glasses with crimson dregs in

the bottom of each one. In the kitchen was the customary mess. Nothing

unusual in that. Queenie knew the tidiness and cleanliness achieved by

herself and Olive was bound not to last. Otto's food bowl was half full.

"Without quite knowing why, Queenie felt relieved Gwendolen had been

strong enough to feed him before she went to bed.

There was no help for it, she was going to have to climb those stairs.

Twice, probably, because Gwendolen would be bound to want a cup of

tea. Solve that problem by making it now. The old kettle, burn-encrusted

on its outside and no doubt coated in limescale within, took ages to boil.

Finally Queenie was able to make the tea, a cup for Gwendolen and one

for herself, liberally sugared with granulated for energy.
She put both on
a tray and began the climb.

Gwendolen's bed was empty and so was the room. The
bed was made,

not approaching Queenie's own standard with "hospital
corners" but

exactly the way Gwendolen would think adequate. The
curtains were

drawn halfway across the windows and the place was as
stuffy as usual.

Queenie came out and a voice from above said, "Hi,
there."

Very unlike him, she thought. Why was he being so
pleasant?"Is that

you, Mr. Cellini? Good morning. Do you happen to know
where Miss

Chawcer is?" .

He came down. She thought he looked terrible, his
round face gaunt and

hollow-eyed, the skin with a clammy sheen to it. His belly
bulged over his

jeans and the laces on his trainers were undone. "She's
gone away," he

said. "For convalescence, she said. Somewhere near
Cambridge. She's got

friends there."

As far as Queenie knew she had no friends but her and
Olive. Then she

remembered Gwendolen had said she was expecting a
letter from

Cambridge--or had it been Oxford?--the one she had
practically accused

Mr. Cellini of purloining. Had Gwendolen had a letter from
these friends

and said nothing about it to her or Olive? It was more than possible. It

would be like her. Or these Cambridge people might have phoned last

evening. Still, it was very short notice. And Gwendolen had hardly

seemed fit enough...

"When did she go?"

Must have been about eight. I went downstairs to get my mail and there

she was in the hall with her bag packed waiting for a cab to come."

Queenie couldn't imagine Gwendolen calling a cab, still less having an

account with some taxi company, but what did she know? How would

she know?

"I supposed she asked you to feed the cat?"

"Sure and I said I'd see to it."

"Do you know when she'll be back

"She never said."

"Well, there's no point in me staying, Mr. Cellini. I've a brunch party to

go to." Queenie was proud of having been invited, as a widow of no

particular importance, to what amounted to someone else's family

gathering. "It's a joint venture of Olive and her niece Mrs. Akwas."

He stared. "Will Miss Nash be there?"

Ridiculous man! She remembered the things he had said to Nerissa the

day Gwendolen came out of hospital. He obviously had it bad, was quite

smitten, as her late husband used to say. "Sadly for us, she won't."

Queenie disliked a man showing a preference for any woman but herself.

She took a certain malicious pleasure, quite unlike her, in denying Mr.

Cellini the chance of sending some lovey-dovey message. "She always has

a day out with her father about this time of year and they've fixed on

today. It's become quite a tradition."

She went downstairs and to her surprise he followed her. "Did you drive

here?" he asked when they were in the hallway."

I haven't got a car. Why do you ask?"

"It doesn't matter. I just thought if you had you might take me up to the

DIY place on the North Circular."

Queenie, who generally lacked Olive's acerbity, for once forgetting to

exercise her charm on a man said sharply for her, "I'm sure I'm sorry to

disappoint you. You'll have to go on the bus." At the front door she

turned round. "Olive and I will both be back. We'll want to get to the

bottom of this mysterious trip of Gwendolen's."

Chapter 25

Buying a sufficiently large and sufficiently thick plastic bag was less easy

than he had thought. There was nothing available as tough as the one he

had taken from the firm's warehouse—why had he been such a fool as to

cut it up and throw it out?—and he had to be satisfied with a cot

mattress cover, designed to be urine-proof. All the way back on the bus

he was thinking of the smell of Danila's body as it began to decay. The

weather was warmer again. On some days it had been up in the twenties

Celsius. Just the same, he knew that burying Gwendolen's body in the

garden would be impossible. As he was walking round the DIY

supermarket he had felt shooting pains begin, little stabs like tiny knives

pricking his spine. He could disable himself for life, he thought, if he

attempted putting a spade to that concrete-like clay.

The body he had wrapped in one of her own threadbare sheets. It lay in

his little hallway. He took the mattress cover out of its packaging and

saw at once it wouldn't do. It was too thin and--he shuddered--too

transparent. If he used it he would be in the same mess as he'd been in

last time--worse, because eventually there would be a search for old

Chawcer. All he could do was wait until tomorrow and try to get a

stronger, thicker bag.

The pain in his back had returned. He shouldn't have dragged that

much heavier body up all those stairs. But what choice had he? And he

was going to have to drag it farther in case something happened to make

it impossible for him to refuse entry to anyone who needed to come into

the flat. As well as the pain he had a sore ankle where that cat had

scratched him. The whole area was red and swollen and he wondered if

Otto's claws were infected with nasty bacteria. But his life was more

important than pain, he thought, and he lugged the body into the living

room, where he dropped it in a corner and pushed the cocktail cabinet

across to hide it.

Its presence there haunted him and he had to move first into the

kitchen, then the bedroom. How could you relax in a room with a body,

however disguised, rolled up in one corner? In the bedroom it was better,

a bit better. He lay on his bed and thought, tomorrow I'll find somewhere

to buy a thicker, stronger bag and then I'll put her in it and under the

floorboards. After that, I'll put it out of my mind, I won't think about it

anymore.

Nerissa was out with her father. She was his only daughter and his

youngest child and though he couldn't have said he loved her better than

his sons, he loved her differently, partly because she was the girl he had

longed for and partly because her skin was almost as dark as his. His

sons had their mother's features and skin lighter than his own. They

were tall and handsome and successful at what they did and he was

proud of them, but they didn't look like members of his tribe--its women

were famously beautiful as Nerissa did and his old mother did. So, for no

religious or ritualistic reason but just because they always did, he took

the day off and he and Nerissa went to the heltered housing in

Greenford where his mother lived and, also for no particular reason

except that they always did, took her a flowering plant from Africa and

the best mangoes they could find (not, alas, sun-ripened and with juicedripping golden flesh) and a bunch of pink and red and gold banksias

from the Cape, though this was not her part of that continent but the

best they could do.

In the car on the way Nerissa tied up her head in a wonderful white and

pink and emerald turban because this was what, in Grandma's eyes,

women who dressed properly went out in, and she wore an emerald

green caftan with a ruby border and looked like a chief's wife. "When they

had made Tom's mother happy and in her company had eaten and

drunk all sorts of things Nerissa knew she would have to compensate for

by starving herself, they got back in the car and drove to wherever they

were going for their day out. Somewhere different each year. Last time it

had been the Thames Barrier and the Maritime Museum at Greenwich

and this time it was Hampton Court Palace. Before they got there Nerissa

unwound the turban, tied her hair back in a ponytail and put on big

sunglasses so that she wouldn't be recognized. She kept the caftan on.

While they were walking round looking at things, the day having turned

out to be warm and fine, Nerissa told her father, the words coming out in

a rush, that she had fallen in love with Darel Jones.

"But you don't know him all that well, do you?" said Tom.

"I suppose not. I haven't seen him since we all went there for dinner. But

I know. I know I've been in love with him for years and years. Ever since

they came to live next door."

"Is he in love with you, my darling?"

"I wouldn't think so, Dad. Not for a moment. If he was he'd do

something about it. He wouldn't just ask me to dinner with all you lot

there as well."

They had lunch in an Italian restaurant in Hampton, discovered by Tom

who was good on restaurants. "While they were eating their zabaglione--or

Tom was eating his and Nerissa was pretending she couldn't finish hershe told her that as she was so beautiful and he, personally, thought she

was pretty nice as well, neither her appearance nor her character could

be responsible for Darel's indifference.

"I suppose it could just be a case of Dr. Fell," said Tom.

"Who's Dr. Fell?"

" 'I do not love thee, Dr. Fell,

The reason why I cannot tell,

But this one thing I know full well,

I do not love thee, Dr. Fell.' "

"I hope not," said Nerissa, "because if that's it there'll be no putting it to rights."

"Love's a funny thing. Your mother was beautiful, still is in my opinion,

but I don't know why I fell in love with her, and God knows why she fell

in love with me. Your grandma would say things were a lot easier when

the suitor and the girl's parents arranged the match and the chap got a

flock of goats and some bushels of corn with his bride."

"Darel couldn't keep goats in Docklands," said Nerissa,"and I don't

suppose he'd know what to do with bushels of corn. He did say that if got

harassed by that man who's stalking me I was to call him and he'd come.

Any time of the day or night, he said."

"Are you being harassed?" Tom sounded anxious.

"Not really. I haven't seen him for a week."

"Well, if you do, call Darel and kill two birds with one stone."

Nerissa thought about it. "I don't want to actually look forward to the

guy coming back."

"Think again," said Tom. "Maybe you do want to."

Early next morning Queenie and Olive met at St. Blaise House and held a

two-woman conference. Both were indignant that Gwendolen had gone

away without letting them know. They sat in the drawing room, having

spread two clean table napkins across the seat of the sofa, drinking an

instant coffee brew that Olive had made and eating pastries from the confectioner's box Queenie had brought with her, neither of them much fancying food that came out of Gwendolen's kitchen.

"This room is filthy," said Olive. "This whole house is filthy."

She had sterilized the cups with boiling water and Dettol before filling them with coffee.

"Well, dear, we know that but we don't have to live here, thank

goodness, and if you're thinking of having a whole house clean-up while

poor Gwendolen is away, I wouldn't. You know what she was like when

we tackled her kitchen. I think we should mind our own business."

"I can't understand her going away at all. In all the years I've known her

she's never been away."

"And she's never mentioned friends in Cambridge."

"No, but the professor may have known people there. In fact, it's quite likely."

"That may be," said Queenie, "but why has she never said? And, you

know, dear, people of her age"--Gwendolen had been ten years older than

she and twelve years older than Olive--"take absolute ages to prepare

themselves for going away to stay anywhere. I remember my dear mother

when she was in her eighties taking a good two weeks to get herself ready

and she was only going to my brother. And she discussed the pros and cons every day before she finally went. Should she leave in the morning or the afternoon? Which train should she catch? Could she ask my brother to meet her or would he do that anyway? You know the sort of thing. And Gwendolen would be just the same. No, she'd be worse."

"Well, I don't know. Drink your coffee before it gets cold."

"I'm sorry, Olive, but I can't. It tastes of disinfectant."

Do you think she's got an address book about anywhere? We could look in that. She must write down people's addresses somewhere."

They walked about the room, remarking on the grime and the cobwebs, and were pulling books out of the bookcase and blowing dust off their

spines when Mix came down into the hallway. He had been on his way

downstairs, starting once more on his quest to find a thick stout plastic

bag, when he heard them come into the house. At first he had retreated

into his own flat, then, later, decided it would be best to confront them

and, most importantly, ask them to return the house key.

A few moments before he entered the drawing room, Olive had found

Gwendolen's ancient address book in a drawer among scraps of paper,

broken pencils, safety pins, elastic bands, antique 15 amp electric plugs,

and about fifty used checkbooks in which only the stubs remained. When

Mix came in she looked up from the entries under B, which was as far as

she had reached, and said, "Oh, good morning, Mr. Cellini," in an

unpleasant tone ..

"Hiya," said Mix.

"We were just wondering if you happened to know the name of the

friends Miss Chawcer is staying with."

"No, I don't. She didn't say."

"We're very anxious to know," said Queenie. "It's so unlike her to go

away without a word." She gave Mix one of the smiles that had been so

winning when she was eighteen, and laid her hand on his arm. After all,

he was a man. "We thought she might have confided in you."

He made no answer. "Can I have the key back?"

"What key?" Olive said sharply.

"The key to this house. You won't need it now she's okay." "Yes, we will.

We need to come in and see to the place while she's away. And another

thing. I shall give this key up to Miss Chawcer and no one else. Is that

understood?"

"Okay, keep your cool." Mix turned away and said over his shoulder,

"You don't want to send your blood pressure up at your age."

This was unwise of him, though Olive appeared to react not at all. She

said nothing to him or to Queenie even when she heard the front door

close behind him but sat down on the napkin-covered sofa by the table

and continued to turn the pages of Gwendolen's address book.

"What a terribly rude person he is," said Queenie.

"Yes. There's not a single Cambridge address in this book, Queenie."

"Perhaps she knows it so well she doesn't need to write it down."

"At her time of life you forget your own name if you don't write it down."

Olive closed the book. "What are we going to do? We can't just leave it. I

thought Gwen was looking very unwell when I saw her on Sunday. She

looked as if she ought to have been in bed. And the next thing we know is

she's gone off first thing next morning to stay with people no one has

ever heard of in Cambridge. In a taxi? When did Gwen ever go anywhere

in a taxi, always supposing she knew how to order one."

"Well, dear, I wouldn't trust that man Cellini an inch."

"Then what were you doing smirking at him in that flirtatious way?"

He should have been out, calling at DIY places and hardware stores, but

he was afraid to leave those two old hags at large in the house. They

would be bound to search it. And what if old Chawcer had kept a key to

his flat? He'd never inquired and, to his knowledge, she hadn't been in

there while he was out. On the other hand, she had never told him she

possessed a key to his place and he'd never asked. If she had one they

would find it. He dared not take the risk of going out.

Outside his flat he sat on the top step of the tiled flight and listened. He

heard them come out of the drawing room. He could hear their voices,

twittering to each other shrilly. Like birds of prey, he thought, ravens or

whatever those creatures were that you saw pecking at dead things on

motorway verges. Dead things--his comparison reminded him of the body

that lay, inadequately wrapped, behind the cocktail cabinet not many

feet away from him. It was very warm in the flat. He remembered what

had happened to Danila's body when it got warm and he went about,

opening windows.

It seemed those two had gone into the kitchen. He crept down a floor,

twinges running through his back. From there he could hear them

banging about in the kitchen and wash house. What were they looking

for? They came back into the hall and he went back to halfway up the last

flight. Not that there was much chance of their seeing or hearing him.

Their lumbering progress up the stairs was too slow for that as they

puffed and panted and took rests, clinging, he guessed, to the banisters.

Ofc ourse they were making for old Chawcer's bedroom,
and their

presence there made him more uneasy than ever. From
the top landing,

through the banister rail, he watched them go into the
room. To his relief

they didn't close the door. He heard them walking about
in there, moving

small pieces of furniture, shifting ornaments about. One
of them

coughed, no doubt from dust released when a curtain
was lifted or a

shelf searched.

He didn't like them being in there. That was where he
had killed her

and he still wondered if he had left behind some
evidence of his presence

and his activities. Then he rememberedh e had taken the
top sheet off

her bed to wrap her in. A wash of heat flooded over him.
Old women

would be bound to spo tthat, it was the kind of thing they
noticed. He

found himself trembling all over, his hands shaking and
out of control.

But they came out of the room after about ten minutes
andhe heard Ma

Fordyce say as they went down the stairs, "I feel sure
there's something

we've missed, Queenie. It's just a feeling I have."

"So have I, dear. There's something in this house that if
wecould find it

would tell us at once where she is and whatshe's up to."

"I'm not so sure of that."

The rest of what Ma Fordyce said he could no longer hear
.By that time

she was down in the hallway and all that was audible to him was the

twitter of their voices. He listened for the front door to open and close.

Putting her coat on, Queenie said that the weather was getting hot

again. There was something unnatural about it, didn't Olive think?

"Global warming," said Olive. "I expect the earth will burn up but at

least we won't still be here to see it."

"Now isn't that being a wee bit morbid, dear?"

"Just realistic. I've been thinking about that missing sheet.

Gwen is such a peculiar woman, perhaps she never used a top sheet, just

a blanket and an eiderdown."

"Oh, no, dear. I don't mean she's not peculiar. I absolutely agree with

you there. But as to not using a top sheet, I know she did. I distinctly

remember seeing one when we used to go in to her bedroom before she

went into hospital. Very grubby it was, too."

"Then where is it?" said Olive as they closed the front door behind them

and went down the path into St. Blaise Avenue.

It was the middle of the afternoon before Mix succeeded in buying a

sufficiently large and stout plastic bag. The pain in his back which had

eased a little that morning now came back with stabbing shafts and a

very unpleasant kind of prickling like red hot needles being dragged up

and down his vertebrae. Once the principal aim of his errand was

satisfied, he had meant to go into the Job Centre, but he was finding that

he could scarcely walk upright and the negligible weight of the plastic

bag was almost too much for him. If he went into the Job Centre like that

they'd think he'd come in to apply for incapacity benefit. At this rate,

maybe it would come to that

Once he was home again, a little comforted by a large BootCamp--he

had run out of gin--he braced himself to take the body out of its sheet

wrapping and transfer it to the bag. He crawled toward it on his hands

and knees but, as he pulled himself up by holding on to the cocktail

cabinet, he knew he would be unable to move even so relatively light a

piece of furniture without injuring his back perhaps beyond cure, and

there was no other way of getting the body out from behind it, for the two

rear corners of the cabinet were close up against the walls that met at

right angles.

Panic took hold of him. Tears started in his eyes and he drummed on

the floor with his fists. After a while, doing his best to control himself, he

crawled into the kitchen and, once more hauling himself up, took four

strong ibuprofen and swallowed them down with the Boot Camp dregs.

Some hours later Olive came back to St. Blaise House, bringing her niece

Hazel Akwaa. She felt she needed the support of a sensible younger

person. The sun was setting and crimsonlight lit up the sky over

Shepherd's Bush and Acton when the two women went out into the

garden. On the other side of the wall, where the fairy light palm tree

rivalled the sunset, Mr.Singh was throwing down handfuls of corn for his

geese.

He said, "Good evening, Mesdames," with exquisitepoliteness.

"I love your tree," said Hazel. "It's gorgeous."

"You are very kind. In the absence of a gardener, my wife and I felt the

place needed a soupcon of beautifying. How is Miss Chawcer?"

"She seems to have gone away to convalesce with friends."It was the

middle of the afternoon before Mix succeeded in buying a sufficiently

large and stout plastic bag. The pain in hisback which had eased a little

that morning now came back withstabbing shafts and a very unpleasant

kind of prickling like redhotneedles being dragged up and down his

vertebrae. Oncethe principal aim of his errand was satisfied, he had

meantto go into the Job Centre, but he was finding that he could"

To the countryside, I hope? That will do her good."

Olive was looking round for Otto. "D'you know," she said, "I haven't set eyes on that cat since the day before yesterday."

"Now you mention it," said Mr. Singh, "nor have I. Not, I must say, that

I find this a matter for regret. It is such a predator that I fear my poor

geese may meet the same fate as my guinea fowl."

Throwing a final handful of corn, he gave Olive and Hazel a kind of court

bow and went off into his house. The geese cackled and gobbled.

"Have a look at that flowerbed," said Hazel. "Doesn't it look as if

someone's been digging a grave?"

"You've got too active an imagination, Hazel."

"If I have it's because when I'm round here I always think of the

murderer Christie. He only lived a stone's throw away. I was a baby when

it happened but when we were little kids we used to go around to

Rillington Place and stare at his house."

"I remember it well," said Olive. "First they renamed it, then they pulled

it down. I don't remember that happening anywhere else a murderer

lived."

"Like what the Romans did to Carthage. They razed it to the ground,

Tom told me, and plowed over the site. Christie buried several of those

women in his garden."

"Well, no one's buried Gwendolen. That earth's been turned like that

quite a while ago. Thistles are starting to grow on it. But I do wonder

what's become of that cat. Whatever Gwendolen says, I'm sure she's

quite fond of it and if it's missing when she gets back from wherever

she's got to, no prizes for guessing who gets the blame."

It may have been the effect of the pills or the strong spirit or both, but

after Mix had slept for a while he awoke feeling dizzy, the pain still there

but weak like the memory of a past headache or the anticipation of one

still to come. When he first lay down and closed his eyes, it was with an

uneasy feeling that something had happened earlier that was vitally

important but that for some reason he hadn't recognized for what it was.

It nagged at his mind but drifted away when sleep came. Now, as

his dizziness subsided, his mind seemed to clear. He knew what had

happened earlier and understood perfectly what it would have said to

him if he had been open to receive it.

Ma Winthrop had touched his arm, his bare arm, with one finger. It was

when she was asking him if old Chawcer had confided in him. Her finger

had touched him and it had been warm, as warm as the skin it touched.

And that should have told him, but told him only now, that old people

weren't cold to the touch, their temperature was the same as in young

ones. So if old Chawcer was ice-cold it was because she was

dead already.

She had been dead before he entered the room, before he looked at her,

before he touched her. That was why her skin felt like ice and why she

hadn't struggled when he held the pillow over her face. Sweat broke out

across his face and the palms of his hands, yet a great chill passed

through him. He had killed a dead woman. It seemed to him an awful

thing to have done and a stupid thing. He had killed someone who was

already dead.

In a way it was like what Reggie did. No wonder the ghost had seemed

sympathetic to him. Of course he hadn't touched her like Reggie did--the

horror of that brought him out in a fresh sweat. But there had been

points of resemblance. Was he under Reggie's influence, then? Had the

ghost directed him?

He got up and walked across the room to where the body was. He put

his hands on the top of the cocktail cabinet and leaned on it. Gradually it

was coming to him that if he had known, if only he had realized, he could

have simply looked at her, touched that cold skin and left her there. She

couldn't have said anything to the police. She was dead. Instead, he had

held a pillow over her face while counting to five hundred. He had pulled

a sheet from her bed and wrapped up in it a woman who had been dead

for hours. It must have been hours for the body to be so cold.

In doing so he had incriminated himself, for who would now believe she

had died a natural death? He had taken away her body and hidden it, he

had removed a sheet from her bed, perhaps left some of his DNA—he was

vague about this adhering to her skin, told those two old women she had

gone away, said he had seen her waiting for a taxi. And now he had her

body up here. Would the police be able to find out she died naturally?

Would a coroner? It mustn't come to that.

Whatever it might do to his back, even if it crippled him for life, he had

to get it into the bag tonight and stowed away under the floorboards. His

ankle felt more painful than ever, a pulse throbbing under the stretched

purplish skin.

Chapter 26

When he first went into the room it looked pitch dark, dark as the inside

of a black box, and he thought he might have to leave his task until it

grew light at six-thirty in the morning. But gradually his eyes grew

accustomed to this absence of light. The sky outside the window began to

seem transparent and luminous and the moon was gone.
He switched off

the flashlight and still -had enough light to see by. He
closed the door. As

he knelt down and got to work he told himself not to
think about the

ghost, to force himself to dismiss it from his mind in case
fear paralyzed
his hands.

When it was done he made sure the boards were back
exactly as they

had been when the floor was first laid: dovetailed,
parallel, and with no

protruding edges. Gwendolen's body he had sealed up in
the heavy

plastic, first tying up the mouth of the bag with wire, then
making his

confidence in the security of this fastening absolutely
sure with

superglue. All the time he worked his back hurt him, the
pain sometimes

a steady ache but sometimes hammering instruments of
torture into

his spine. These totally incapacitated him for whole
minutes at a time so

that he had to bend forward until his chest was almost on
his knees, and

hold his hands pressed into the small of his back.

When he had finished and the body was gone, he felt
more than relief. It

was as if he or someone had utterly destroyed it, by
burning perhaps or

by some chemical process. Or as if she had never died,
only been hidden

away beyond talking to the police, beyond return to this
house. In the

gloom the bedroom looked the same as ever with all tools and glue and

wire put away. There were the old gas lamp, the tall chest of drawers

with the crazed mirror on its top, the naked bedstead, the window that

refused to open. Cobwebs still hung from the ceiling and dust still lay on

the windowsill. This was the Westway's quietest time, its breakers almost

stilled and its sighings muted.

A great weight seemed to be lifted from him. His back still ached, his

ankle was still throbbing and he was very tired, but he felt that his

troubles would soon be over. All the time he was in there he had quite

successfully kept away thoughts of the ghost, but they returned when he

was out on the landing. Inside the flat, he tried to relax, to read himself to

sleep with the one Christie book he hadn't yet opened, though he'd had it

for weeks. He lay on his bed and turned the pages of The Man Who Made a

Judge Cry but every chapter heading he read and every illustration he

looked at reawakened fears that he might have left some incriminating

evidence behind. The book too reminded him of his fate if he were

discovered, not the same as Christie's, for his killings had been in the

time of capital punishment, but bad enough. It was at this point that he

realized he had stopped calling the murderer Reggie and begun

referring to him in his mind by his surname.

To stop himself repeating over and over, I killed a dead woman, I killed a

dead woman, he turned his thoughts to the problem of where Gwendolen

was supposed to have gone. There was no way they could prove she

hadn't gone, no way they could discover where she had or had not gone.

Those two old women would soon grow tired of speculating about her.

The house would remain empty for a while but for himself. He'd have no

rent to pay in old Chawcer's absence and he'd stay where he was just

until he'd become Nerissa's boyfriend.

There seemed no impediments now to getting to know her properly. She

had always been so nice to him that she was probably waiting for him to

come and see her, she might even be disappointed that he hadn't come

yet and was thinking he'd let her down. He'd go over to Campden Hill

today. Thus he reassured himself.

It was two in the morning now. He anointed his back with the anti-inflammatory preparation the pharmacist had recommended and felt the

glowing warmth it produced spread through his muscles. He took two

ibuprofen, stripped off his clothes and lay on his bed, thinking, I killed a

woman who was already dead.

Although she had resolved on the night of Darel's party that she would

never go near a fortune-teller again, that it was obvious nonsense and

she should never have fallen for it, everyone said so, Nerissa was again

consulting Madam Shoshana. It would be the last time, she was

determined on that, but she had to have the soothsayer's opinion on

whether or not she had a chance with him. Before she went out she tidied

her bedroom, putting used tissues and scraps of cotton wool into the

wastebasket, picking up discarded garments and dropping them into the

linen bin. She even pulled back the quilt to air sheet and mattress before

Lynette came to make the bed. Downstairs everywhere was already tidy.

It was a dreadful chore and it wore her out but as she took dirty glasses

into the kitchen, she thought how approving Darel would be when at last

he came here, that he'd think how suited she was to be his girlfriend and

even what a wonderful wife she'd make.

Johnny Cash and the girl who loved the boy next door who worked at

the candy store had been put away. The CD, currently on the player was

Dvorak. Two new books from Hatchard's, one on European politics in the

post-Cold War period and the other called The Case Against the Occult,

lay on the coffee table, from which everything else had been cleared

away. If only he would come and see the civilized, even intellectual, milieu

in which she lived!

Fear of again meeting Mix Cellini on the stairs at the spa troubled her

during her drive to Westbourne Grove. She had put on baggy jeans and a

gray sweatshirt because she knew these clothes did nothing to flatter her,

and she hadn't made up her face. Still, it hadn't escaped her notice that

makeup does very little for a black woman who is already beautiful. Her

dad even said--of course he would--that she looked better without it. She

just had to hope it wouldn't be Cellini's day for doing whatever he did to

the spa's machines. If she had to see him she wanted it to be in

Campden Hill Square, where she'd at least have a reason for phoning

Darel. In the event she got up those stairs without an encounter of any

kind. She knocked on the door and the unprecedented happened.

Shoshana asked her to wait one minute. Take a seat and wait just a

minute. She noticed from her watch that she was two minutes early.

Learning to be punctual was also part of the Darel-pleasing drive. Unless

she had sat on the floor there was nothing on that tiny landing to sit on,

so Nerissa stood, thinking about Darel Jones and her new Face of 2004

job and a photo shoot for Vogue and Darel Jones and the books

she meant to read to please him. Then Madam Shoshana called, "Come,"

in her low, thrilling voice.

She had asked Nerissa to wait because the girl was early for once, and

when she knocked on the door Shoshana had been busy with Hecate's

spine-crippling spell. She had renewed it once and now decided it was

time to call a halt. Not because she had any pity for Mix Cellini, but due

to her own frugality. The spell could be re-used four times; she had only

done the business twice and who knew when someone else would come

along that Shoshana would think deserved a bad back? After all, she

was going to have to pay for it. Just because no account had yet come in

from Hecate, this didn't mean the witch wasn't going to charge her.

Hecate was like those very upmarket doctors or dentists who send in their

accounts and give you a nasty shock months after their treatment has

ended and you've forgotten all about it.

The table was still littered with the paraphernalia required by the spell.

Not exactly eye of newt and toe of frog but several vessels of distilled

water, a phial of sulphuric acid, and one of pregnant woman's urine sometimes difficult to get, that one, but

Kayleigh, who was living with

Abbas Reza and expecting his child, had happily produced it-a jar of

bicarbonate of soda and a bottle of green ink. Not that she was going to

use any of it, he had had his two weeks of pain, but she had to throw the

urine away, restore the bicarb to the cupboard where it belonged, and put

the sulphuric acid back in its ribbed green bottle. All this must be put

away before Nerissa came in and the gemstones were laid out instead.

Nerissa had always been in awe of Madam Shoshana. She was more

than a little afraid of her and she disliked the wizard and the owl, the dirt

(though not the untidiness) repelled her, and Shoshana herself was

possessed of an ugliness that made her shrink. Today the soothsayer

had got herself up in a feather-trimmed robe, grayish and bluish, and

she wore a crest of black feathers on her head so that, to Nerissa, she

looked like some evil bird of prey. Her clawlike hands played

mysteriously above the ring of stones.

"When we've done that," Nerissa said tentatively, putting her hands

inside the circle, "may I ask you something?"

"Why not ask the stones? Which ones do you feel drawing toward your

fingers?"

Knowing very well that whichever she said she felt moving toward her,

Shoshana would say she had picked the wrong ones,
Nerissa said the

first colors that came into her head.

"The yellow one and the mauve one."

"Really? I don't believe you are concentrating. Plainly,
it's the blood-red

carnelian and the pallid rose quartz that are drawn to you
today. Make

your request to the carnelian."

"All right." The guests at Darel's party might have been
gratified if they

could have seen what a fool Nerissa thought she was,
asking a piece of

rock its opinion. But, blushing, she asked it. "There's a
man," she began

and faltered. She cleared her throat. "There's a man that I
want to know, I

want to get some idea if he'll--well, if he'll ever love me."

Not surprisingly, the dark red crystal remained silent.
Nerissa, feeling

better now the words were out, almost giggled at the
idea of its finding a

voice. I wouldn't feel like laughing if it did though, she
thought.

Shoshana appointed herself its interpreter and Nerissa
felt very unlike

laughing at what she said.

"You will have to summon him. Call him and he will come.
And then,

when he comes, all will depend on how you speak to him.
What you say

then will determine your fate--for the rest of your life."
Shoshana looked

up and met Nerissa's eyes.

"That is all. The carnelian has spoken."

The fifty pounds paid, for Madam Shoshana had put up her fee, Nerissa

went back down the stairs, half afraid of encountering Mix Cellini. The

only person she saw, waiting downstairs, the stairs being too narrow for

two people to pass, was a woman and Madam Shoshana's next client.

The backache was still there when Mix woke up, but it had become

subdued and dull, and the scratches on his ankle were healing. He had

slept well but for one bad dream. He showered, washed his hair under

the shower, and dressed carefully, feeling much better, though unable to

forget the dream. It had concerned his stepfather and his, Mix's, journey

up to Norfolk to find Javy and kill him. This was something he had often

fantasized about while still a child and hadn't thought of for years. Javy

had walked out on Mix's mother when Mix was fourteen and gone to live

with another woman in King's Lynn or near it. But the desire to kill him

in a painful way and watch him die in agony came back in the dream

and when wide awake, as he now was, Mix saw nothing irrational or

impractical in it. After all, he had killed two people (or thought he had)

and got away with it, so there was no reason why he shouldn't kill a third.

Christie would have thought nothing of it, it would have been all in the

day's work to him. Javvy had done more to deserve being his victim than

either of those women, the young or the old.

There was little point in his going to Campden Hill Square before ten.

The morning was fine, the sky clear and blue, and breakfast television

told him it was going to be a warm and sunny day with the slight chance

of a shower. The walk ahead of him seemed a pleasant prospect and

what came at the end of it ... He had a plan for getting into her house

and to this end armed himself with an orange cardboard folder left over

from his job with the firm, a couple of election pamphlets he'd kept for

some forgotten reason, and two ballpoint pens. At twenty past nine he

was ready to leave when he heard the front door open and close and

someone enter the hallway below.

Of course it was Ma Winthrop. It was bound to be one of them. They

were like buses, another would be along in a minute. He should have got

that key from them, by force if necessary. Imagine the fuss there'd have

been as a result! At first he felt at her arrival that tautening of the

muscles which is one of the signs of fear, and then he reminded himself

that he had nothing to be afraid of. Old Chawcer was as hidden

and invisible as if she really was in Cambridge; more securely hidden, for

no one could run her to earth where she was. So he said, "Morning," to

Ma Winthrop as he passed her in the hallway, and "Lovely day," as he

opened the front door. Ma Fordyce was turning in at the gate.

"Another meeting of the Women's Institute?" said Mix rudely. "Must be

great to have so much time on your hands."

Olive walked past him with her nose in the air.

She and Queenie spent a while indignantly discussing his behavior and

tearing his character to bits. Then, with two milky coffees with grated

chocolate on top, in cups that Queenie had brought with her, and a

Danish pastry each, they sat by the open French windows in the drawing

room, holding a council as to what should be done about Gwendolen.

Opening those windows had not been easy. The bolts were stuck until

Olive oiled them. Finally she managed to wrench the two glass doors

apart. About fifty dead spiders and their accumulated webs of a quarter of

a century fell down onto the floor and something that looked like a very

old and long-deserted swallow's nest collapsed on the steps, scattering

mud and sticks and shattered eggshells everywhere.

"How anyone can live like this!" exclaimed Olive, not for the first time.

Queenie gave an exaggerated shudder. "It's quite awful. But you know,

dear, we have to think what we're going to do about Gwen. If that man is

to be believed she went to catch a train for Cambridge on Monday

morning, two days ago. Suppose he made Cambridge and the train up?

Suppose she was just going for a little walk and while she was out she

collapsed and nows he's in hospital somewhere? Who would know? Who

would they tell?"

"Yes, but why would he?"

"Who knows what goes on in the mind of a man like that? He might be

planning to get her out of this house so he can take it over. I've heard of

unscrupulous tenants doing that to old people who are their landlords

and he's exactly the type."

The more practical Olive said they could try phoning hospitals.

"Yes, dear, but which hospitals? There must be hundreds in London.

Well, dozens. Where do we start?"

"Around here. If she went for a little walk, like you said though it seems

very unlike Gwen to me--she wouldn't have got far before she collapsed.

So it's going to be St. Charles around the corner here or St. Mary's

Paddington, isn't it? I'll phone St. Charles the minute I've finished my

coffee. Oh, Queenie, look what I've found down the side of this chair! It's

that thong thing poor Gwen went on and on about."

"How very peculiar. I'm going to shut those doors, dear,
or more flies
will come in."

Before leaving home, he had fortified himself with two
strong vodka. No

tonic, just a couple of ice cubes. Not Dutch but Russian
courage. He set

off to walk along Oxford Gardens toward Ladbroke Grove.
His backache

had gone but for the occasional faint twinge to remind of
what had been,

and he felt charged with confidence. Passing the house
where Danila had

lived, he told himself how silly he'd been to worry about
her. Nothing had

come of it. Most of the things you have worried about
have never

happened. He had read that somewhere and it was true.

Above his head, Kayleigh was at one of the windows of
the first-floor flat

she now shared with Abbas Reza, looking down into the
street. Trees,

still in full leaf, grew on both sides along it, but outside
this house one

had been cut down and removed so it was possible to get
a clear view.

They were going out for lunch, which they planned to
have in a pub on

the river. Kayleigh wasn't due for work at the spa before
four, and she

was studying the pavements for evidence of raindrops.
She

never bothered with mags or umbrellas herself but Abbas,
being older,

took a serious view of these things.

She called to him, "I don't know what those splashes on the window

was, Abby, but it wasn't rain. Come and see."

Abbas came over, put his arm around her waist, and looked down. A

man in the kind of clothes called "smart casual" was walking past in the

direction of Ladbroke Grove.

"It is he!"

Any student of such matters would have known Abbas was an incomer

to the United Kingdom by the grammatical correctness of his English.

Kayleigh set him right.

"What's him, Abby?"

"The person who has just passed by, it is he I passed on the stairs

when he has been visiting Miss Kovic."

"You're kidding."

"Oh, no, I kid you not, Kayleigh. He is the boyfriend all search for."

"Are you sure? Are you absolutely sure? 'Cos if you are, you'll have to

tell the police. So are you positive?""

Now you put it like this, no, I am not sure that I could swear in a court,

this is he. I must think. If only it is possible for me to see him close. If I

go after him, if I go now ... "

"No, you don't, Abby. We're going out--remember? And if you get up

close and personal it'll be you they're arresting, not him."

No bus came so Mix walked all the way down Ladbroke Grove and

crossed Holland Park Avenue to make his way up to Nerissa's house. Her

car wasn't on the forecourt. Did that mean she had put it away in the

garage or could she be out? Please don't let her be out, he prayed to a

deity whom he didn't believe in and who he dimly knew wouldn't support

him in escaping retribution but just might help him to become

Nerissa's lover. The deity, or guardian angel, did. As he was walking

up the

path

of

a

house

next

door

but

two,

rather

ostentatiously brandishing the orange folder, the Jaguar swept up the hill

and swung into her driveway. She couldn't have seen him, he

was concealed from view by a large bush covered in red berries. Mix rang

the bell and when it was answered by a woman in large black-rimmed

glasses and a pin-striped suit began earnestly outlining to her his own

assessment of the virtues of Proportional Representation.

As always, Nerissa had scanned the street as she drove up it for the blue

Honda. Once more it wasn't there. It hadn't been there for well, it must be

two weeks by now. He's given up, she thought, and this, though what she

longed for, would leave her with no excuse for phoning Darel Jones.

Even though she had had a shower before she went out, she always felt

soiled after she had been in Madam Shoshana's well, "den" was the word

she always used for it. Anyway, she was going out to lunch with the

Vogue woman and she might as well get ready now. So when Mix rang her

doorbell half an hour later, she was dressed in a pale yellow suit, her hair

up in a chignon, and her legs encased in primrose yellow suede boots.

The woman in the severe suit and the glasses had given Mix a hard

time. She told him she was a Member of Parliament, until recently a

lecturer at the London School of Economics. What she didn't know about

Proportional Representation, and indeed all psephological systems,

plainly wasn't worth knowing, while he knew nothing but what he had

read in a tabloid newspaper. He left, feeling unfairly punished for simply

trying to find out if people really like voting for an individual instead of a

political party. The man who answered the door at the next house wasn't

interested and became plainly exasperated when Mix, in rather a

muddled way, tried passing on to him some of the explanations put

forward by the MP. No one was at home next door to Nerissa. He drew a

deep breath, told himself not to be shy, she was just a woman like any

other, and went to the door.

She was aghast to see him but where another woman in her position

might have slammed the door in his face without waiting to hear what he

had to say, she stood, holding it open. She had been brought up to be

well-mannered.

Mix had rehearsed what he would say. "Well, good morning, Miss Nash.

We're not exactly strangers to each other, are we? If I remember rightly,

the first time was at my friend Colette's home."

"We've met before, yes," she said.

She looked so beautiful he could hardly keep the yearning out of his

eyes or the hope from his expression. Like a yellow rose, he thought,

unaccustomed to lyrical comparison, like an African queen. "I don't

expect you knew," he said, using the rehearsed words, "that I do market

research in my leisure time."

"No," she said. "No, I didn't."

"I'd like to talk to you today about elections. I expect you know what

Proportional Representation is, don't you?"

She said nothing, her face puzzled and, in some way he recognized but

couldn't have explained, helpless.

"May I come in?"

It was the last thing she wanted. If he had been a total stranger she would have been able to refuse him but they had spoken before, three times before. "I'm going out." She wasn't for an hour. "Just for a minute, then."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth she knew she shouldn't

have uttered them. She should have been firm, strong, said what she'd

have said and often had, to Jehovah's Witnesses and kitchen equipment

salesmen, thank you very much but she just wasn't interested. Before

she had thought this he was in the house, walking slowly through the

hallway looking admiringly from side to side, nodding and smiling in al

way that plainly indicated admiration of everything.

She would have kept him in the hall and as near to the frontdoor as

possible but he didn't give her the chance. He was in the living room

before she could attempt to stop him. Today was the day the flowers

came. Lynette had taken them in while she was at Madam Shoshana's

and arranged them in the big cream pottery and etched glass bowls. For a

moment she saw it with another's eyes, the eyes of someone not used to

opulence garnished with lilac and lilies and gerberas, and she

understood why he was so impressed.

"This is a very lovely home you have."

"Thank you," she said in rather a small voice.

"May I sit down, Miss Nash? And I have a second request.

"May I call you Nerissa?"

She didn't know how to say no to either. To refuse seemedc hurlish and

somehow setting herself up as superior, and ever since she began to be

known and sought after she had resolved never to think herself better

than anyone else and certainly not to show it. Helplessly, she watched

him settle himself on one of the sofas, open the orange cardboard folder

he was carrying, and look up to give her a hugely wide and toothy grin.

Mix had had plenty of practice, if not quite at this sort of thing, at least

in selling himself and his various products, being pleasant and mildly

flirtatious with women. Any diffidence he might have had in other

circumstances faded when he was talking to a woman and putting across

a point. Besides, the vodka had begun to do its work before he rang the

MP's bell.

He no longer saw any reason to beat about the bush and he said, "I'm

going to come out with the truth frankly, Nerissa, and tell you I'm not

here to talk about politics or elections or boring stuff like that. I don't

know much about it anyway as your smartass neighbor was kind enough

to tell me to my face. No, I'm here to see you because what I said when we

met in old Chawcer's house was all true, every single word of it. And I'd

like to tell you again, choose my words a bit more carefully this time, but

do you think you could rustle us up a coffee first, my love?"

Whether it was that "my love" that did it or his calling her great-aunt's

friend "old Chawcer" or just his tone and look, she couldn't have said,

but as for the coffee, she was glad of a chance to get out of the room and

to her mobile. Not that she was going to call Darel Jones, much as she

would have loved to see him. But she knew she couldn't summon him. It

would be unfair on him to fetch him away from work and a nasty

underhand trick to play on this awful man. All these weeks she had been

longing for the chance to call him, even thinking of encouraging this man

in order to have an excuse, but now she couldn't do it. It was her father

she was going to phone. She put the coffee and the boiling water in the

cafetiere first. Then she dialed her dad at his office and when he

answered, just said,

"Dad, he's here, in the house, that stalker I told you about."

"Right," he said. "I'll handle it."

Nerissa's agent and, come to that, her mother and father and her

brothers and Rodney Devereux, would all have said if asked that Nerissa

must be quite accustomed to dealing with men making
unwelcome

overtures to her, but in fact very few had done so. There
was something

about her, something icemaidenish yet warm and
innocent, that put off

any man even marginally more sensitive than Mix Cellini.
Those whose

approaches were welcome had been few and all of them
knew where they

stood before the initial overture was made. Mix, on the
other hand, was

unable to tell the difference between a woman who
agreed to give him

coffee and a seat because she loathed the idea of being
rude and one who

did so because she shortly hoped to be in bed with him.
He took the cup

she handed him with a slight smile and a sexy look and
said, "Come and

sit here by me."

"I'll stay here if you don't mind."

"Well, I do mind, I mind a lot." Mix distorted his face into
an ingratiating

smile. "But we'll let it pass for the time being."

Now tell me, where did you get your lovely name,
Nerissa? It really is a

most beautiful name and, do you know, I don't think I've
ever come

across it before."

"My mum got it out of a Shakespeare play."

"Really? I see you come from educated people. I reckon
these mixed

partnerships are best, don't you? Mixed-up genes and all
that. My

grandad was Italian. I don't mind telling you, though I don't tell everyone,

he was an Italian prisoner of war. Romantic, eh?"

She said helplessly, "I don't know."

"Maybe I'd best get down to the nitty-gritty. This is very good coffee, by

the way. Very good. What I'm starting to say is, me and you, I guess we've

a lot in common, same sort of background, same sort of age, both fitness

freaks and both living in good old West Eleven. I don't mind telling you

I've been in love with you for yonks and I flatter myself you don't exactly

dislike me. So what say we put it to the test?"

She was on her feet now, seriously frightened and more so when he too

got up. They stood no more than a yard apart and he took a step toward

her.

"How about a little kiss for starters?"

She was preparing to fight him off, use her boot heels as weapons if

necessary, but as she backed away the doorbell rang. It disconcerted

him. He looked, not bewildered or disappointed, but furiously angry, a

pinpoint of red light in each eye, his upper lip curling back.

"Excuse me," she said, knowing these words were ridiculous in the

circumstances. She almost ran to the door to let her father in.

It wasn't her father. It was Darel Jones.

Chapter 27

"Your father called me."

I'll kill Dad, was her first thought, and then love for her father

overwhelmed her. "He shouldn't have," she said.

"That chap--has he gone?"

"He's still here. He's in there."

Darel walked into the room where Mix, still on his feet, was examining a

glass figurine very like the one he had been forced to use on Danila.

Something else they had in common ...

"Get out," said Darel.

"Pardon me? I don't think we've met. Mix Cellini. I'm a friend of Miss

Nash. In point of fact, we were just arranging how we were going to

spend the evening till we were so rudely interrupted. "

"I said get out. Go. Unless you want me to put you out."

"For Christ's sake!" Mix was mystified. "What have I done, I'd like to

know? Ask her if you don't believe me."

"I really would like you to go," Nerissa said. "Please don't fight over it.

Just go."

"Because you ask me, I will," said Mix. "I know you don't mean it. You

know and I know that I'll be back once your bullyboy is out of the way."

He tried to move with dignity toward the door. But he was learning that

though it is possible for a man with a protruding belly to be many things,

dignified is not one of them. He turned in the door. "I'll never let you go,"

he said, more because it was the right thing to say than because he

meant it. He opened the front door and closed it behind him.

"Thank you for that," Nerissa said in a weak voice. "Do you think he

meant it, that he'd never let me go?"

"No. He probably thinks I live here, that I'm your significant other or partner or whatever."

She wanted to say, I wish you were, and, will you be? But she could

only look at him, at his beautifully chiseled Celtic face, the black hair,

the pale skin with the faintest red bloom on the cheeks, at his lean, longfingered hands, at the length of him.

"I've got something to say to you, Nerissa. I've been hoping for a chance

to say it for weeks now."

Impossible to resist a rejoinder to that. "You could have called me."

"I know. I wanted to think carefully about what I knew and what I

wanted. I needed to be sure I'd be doing the right thing.

I'm sure now."

"Sure of what?"

He smiled. "Come here. Sit beside me."

Mix's invitation she had unhesitatingly refused but now the same

request, uttered from the same place on the sofa, had come from Darel,

she accepted it. He turned to face her and took both her hands in his.

"When we came to live next door I was a big teenager and you were a

small one. I thought you beautiful even then--who wouldn't?--but I did

nothing about it. I soon had a girlfriend, anyway. I was away at

university-I was training for five years, one year in the United States-and

when I came home again, you were a famous model."

"I remember," she said.

"I got it into my head you must be an empty-headed frivolous woman. I

thought all models were. Capricious too and what my mother calls stuckup, and-well, with an I-only-getout-of-bed-for-ten-grand sort of attitude.

Of course I couldn't help being attracted to you, but I got to think that if I

was in your company the way you were bound to talk and act would just

make me angry. So I didn't go with my parents when yours asked us next

door for drinks. I knew you'd be there and that stopped me going with

them the day before I oved."

"So what happened?"

"Well, I knew that if I was ever alone with you I'd be bound to ask you

out, I couldn't help myself. I kept thinking too how my mother once said

your mother told her how messy you were about the house and how

unpunctual and I knew I couldn't stand that. I've made a plan for my life,

Nerissa, it's all worked out, where I'm going and how I'm going to get

there. Among other things, I want a serious relationship. I'm nearly

thirty-one and I'm looking to a long-term partnership, even marriage."

She nodded, feeling his hands tighten over hers.

"Marriage and kids too. Why not? But I wasn't willing to travel that

road, playing second fiddle to a woman everyone admired and adored. I

didn't want to be with a woman who was careless and--well, profligate and

extravagant. And I can't stand people who are always late. Frankly, I

wasn't prepared to be 'Mr. Nerissa Nash,' arriving at your sort of party--or

what I thought was your sort of party--an hour late and then have no one

talk to me because you were the cynosure of all eyes."

She didn't know what "cynosure" meant and she wasn't too sure about

"profligate." She listened.

"But that day we encountered each other in St. James's Street," he

went on, "that began to change me. I put you to the test in little ways.

There was that dinner party, for instance. You were actually on time. And

look at this place. I don't imagine you clean it yourself but you certainly

keep it the way the daily has done it. At dinner you talked about politics

and morality and--well, even economics. I thought, I'll leave it awhile. If

she phones me and starts being demanding or pulling her rank, if she

thinks I'm hers for taking whenever she pleases, that'll be it. But you

didn't." He drew her a little toward him. "You passed the test. "With flying

colors. I thought, yes, right, she's fit for what I want, she's really okay. So

how about dinner tonight, Miss Nash?"

Her hands gently withdrawn from his, she moved a few inches back

along the sofa. Her heart, which normally had the slow steady beat, a

doctor had told her, of an athlete or a well-exercised young woman, now

began to race and pound.

"I don't think so," she said, and her voice, even to herself sounded

remote. "I didn't know I was taking part in a quiz, a competition,

whatever. I wouldn't have if I'd known."

"What are you talking about, sweetheart?"

"I'm not your sweetheart and I never will be. I don't do tests to see if I'm

a--a suitable candidate."

"Now, Nerissa, come on.":

"I'm what I am. And whoever does have a what-d'you-call it, permanent

relationship with me, he'll have to take me as I am. Thank you for

coming here and getting rid of that man. I'm grateful but we won't meet

again."

He got up, his face registering a simple lack of comprehension.

"Good-bye, Darel," she said.

As soon as he had gone she picked up the phone, dialed the restaurant

where she was lunching with the Vogue woman and said she'd be half an

hour late. Then she wept for a little. The phone rang while she was

redoing her makeup, repairing the damage tears had done. It was her

father.

"Did he come?"

"Yes, he did. You shouldn't have, Dad. I know you meant well."

"As long as I live I'm going to see my girl gets what she wants if it's in

my power. When are you seeing him again?"

"Never. I'll call you later."

She had one phone call to make before she went out. He picked up the

phone after two rings.

"Rodney, will you take me out tonight? Somewhere awful. I fancy that

Cockatoodle Club in Soho, I've never been there. We'll be late and get

home late and have champagne. No, I know I don't drink but I'll break

my rule tonight. Will you? You're a lamb. See you."

She didn't have to have a partner, she didn't have to marry, she

thought as she got into the taxi. She was young. Why not just enjoy

herself? So long as she was nice to people and didn't get above herself or

start thinking her looks were something she'd achieved and ought to be

proud of. First of all, she'd go to her hairdresser and get him to do her

hair in cornrows or maybe even dreadlocks. She badly needed a gesture

of defiance ...

I can't call my home my own these days, Mix thought, coming downstairs

to pick up what post he had. It was the following day, midway through

the morning, and standing in the hallway, he could hear the voices from

the drawing room of three women. Ma Winthrop, Ma Fordyce, and who

was the third? He listened. Her mother of course, Mrs. Mumbo-jumbo.

What was the point of them coming back here day after day? Until he

realized what he was doing, he felt indignant on old Chawcer's behalf,

not allowed to go away to friends for a few days. What business was it of

theirs? Then he remembered she was dead.

Mrs. Mumbo-jumbo had probably heard all about his stand-off with

bully boy the day before. On the other hand, Nerissa might not have told

her. She might want to get rid of bullyboy and establish a proper

relationship with him before she said anything to her parents. He'd leave

it a day or two and then he'd go back and hear what had happened after

he'd decided the mature thing to do was leave. There was something

about bully boy that reminded him of Javy, the look of him more than

anything. Javy would be gray by now but before Mix left home he'd had

that olive skin and pink cheeks and a lot of black hair. Women found

him attractive, though Mix could never see why.

He'd been to the Benefit Office and signed on. They gave him some

money and offered a whole lot of jobs he hadn't liked the look of. Time

enough for that in a couple of weeks. Not wanting to encounter any of the

three women, he picked up the Dig-it and the Wall mail-order catalogs

and took them upstairs, though being neither a gardener nor a woman,

they weren't much use to him. Twenty-two stairs to the floor where she'd

slept, seventeen up to where no one slept and no one ever went, thirteen

more to the top. He didn't always count them, not when he was afraid,

but he did now, as if he could make them fourteen.

The thong lying in her lap, Hazel Akwaa was asking her aunt and

Queenie if they had thought of going through Gwendolen's clothes. They

both shook their heads and Olive shrugged.

"It seems so intrusive, dear," said Queenie, "such an invasion of her

privacy. I mean, how would you like it if you went away and your friends

started rifling through your clothes? You'd feel violated."

"Yes, I would if I'd told them where I was going and left the address of

where I'd be. But if I'd disappeared and was missing I'd be glad. I'd want

to be found."

"On the whole, I think we should," Olive said. They began climbing the

stairs. "I hope someone's feeding that cat."

"Food has been put down for him every day but it's not been touched

since Sunday. He's gone off somewhere."

"It looks as if he went when Gwendolen went," said Queenie. She told

Hazel about the missing sheet.

"Are you quite sure?"

"She has such funny ways. I thought she could have just taken off the

top sheet and left the bottom one and the blankets but I looked in the

washing machine and even inside that awful old copper-- you never know

with Gwendolen. She might even have taken it with her."

"What, the cat or the sheet?"

"Well, either. No one, but no one, no matter how eccentric, would take a

soiled bedsheet away somewhere to stay with friends. You'd have to be

seriously mad to do that. And how could she manage a cat?"

By now they were all in Gwendolen's bedroom and Olive had opened the

window because the weather was still fine and the sun shining.

"It doesn't smell very nice," said Hazel.

Her aunt shrugged. "Places don't if you don't clean them."

"Youk now, this carpet is actually blue but it's got such a mat of cat's

hair covering it that it looks gray."

Hazel opened the door of the wardrobe and was met by the powerful

reek of camphor. Gwendolen's ancient dresses crowded together on

hangers long ago covered in ruched silk and hung with lavender bags.

Shoes were jumbled together underneath them, not placed in pairs. Olive

began to count them.

"Seven," she said. "And that's significant. She told me not long ago she

had seven pairs of shoes."

"She must have bought some more."

"I'm sure she didn't. She would have told me. I'm not saying she made a

special confidante of me, only that Gwen couldn't buy anything, let alone

a big item like that, without moaning about the cost of it to everyone she

spoke to."

"She couldn't have gone away without any shoes," said Hazel.

"Nor without her ruby ring, dear." Queenie had opened the jewel box

and was looking inside. She held up a ring with a redstone. "It was her

mother's and she never went out without it."

Chapter 28

"You are saying I sit at this window all day every day in case this man

comes by? You are not serious, Kaylee."

"Yes, I am, Ab. If it's him and he's taken Danila hostage and got her shut

up somewhere, handcuffed and tied up and all that, you won't be able to

live with yourself if you don't go to the cops. I bet he comes down here a

lot. I bet he lives round here."

"Kaylee," said Abbas in the voice of someone to whom a great revelation

has been vouchsafed on the road to Damascus.

"Oh, Kaylee ... "

"Whatever is it? You've got quite-well, pale, if you see what I mean."

"Kaylee. That night, after I see him on the stairs, I pick up a card from

the floor I see him drop. He is drunk, you understand, and it fall from his

jacket. I bring it here, into my own flat and ... "

"Where is it now, Ab?"

"Do you think I keep it? A strange man's visiting card?"

"But you read what was on it?"

Abbas sat down and pulled Kayleigh on to his knee. "Sit with me, my

flower, and help me to think. I think hard what was on it."

"Yes, you do that, darling. If you let poor Danila down now, what's our

baby going to think of you."

Their baby, as yet a very small fetus in its mother's womb, need know

nothing about it, as far as Abbas could see, and would hardly be

concerned with its father's memory processes for another fifteen years, if

then. But he could understand that if it was in his power to help the

police find the author of Danila's wrongs, whatever they might be,

untimely death possibly, though he wasn't going to say that to Kayleigh,

who was in a fragile condition and might easily be upset, he was bound

to do so. He thought.

"One word I remember from that card," he said. "Not a man's name or

address ... "

"Oh, Abby ... "

"Wait. One word. It is Fiterama. Yes, Fiterama. What it means, I cannot

tell. But this is on the card."

Kayleigh jumped off his lap. She was very excited. "I know what it

means, Ab. It's the name of the firm the man works for as services the

machines at the spa. Madam Shoshana told me. He didn't come back

with the parts so she gave them a ring to slag him off."

The secondhand crime bookstore wanted to charge Mix twentyfive

pounds for a book on Christie, published forty years before. He had just

happened to take it down from the shelf to look at an illustration, when

the shop assistant pounced.

"It's daylight robbery," he said. "I hope you don't find a buyer."

"There's no need to be abusive," said the shop assistant.

Walking home from Shepherd's Bush, Mix told himself he would buy no

more books on Christie, he would read nothing more about Christie, it

was all over. He might even bring the books he had and see if that chap

would buy them. But for Christie, Danila would be alive and he, Mix,

would never have killed a dead woman. If he were being strictly honest,

he'd say Christie had killed them both himself, bringing his total up to

eight.

Before he set up his own business he'd have to get himself work, and he

certainly couldn't take any of the clerks' and janitors' and council drivers'

jobs on offer. He'd be in Javy's class if he did that. Javy-- ever since he'd

had that confrontation with Nerissa's bully boy he'd been thinking of

Javy, brooding on him, even dreaming of him. It was thirteen years since

he'd seen the man but his hatred hadn't diminished. He'd thought it had,

that it was in the past, but he'd been wrong. Javy had seemed an

obstacle he could never surmount, but now he had dealt with those two

women-"dealt with" was a more realistic way of putting it than "killed"-taking revenge on his stepfather presented itself as quite feasible.

Ahead of him, still parked at the curb, he could see the Brunswicks' old

Volvo. It would just be trouble, he thought, a car, however reputable, of

that age, breaking down on longer journeys, requiring endless

maintenance. While he stared at it, noticing that the £300 notice on its

windscreen was now hanging lopsidedly, Sue Brunswick came out of her

front door, carrying a large sooty-brown cat in her arms. In the events of

last weekend, he had forgotten all about pursuing her.

"Have you thought any more about buying our car?"

"I don't reckon I want it," he said.

The cat he recognized. If he hadn't known him by his color and size he

would have by the look of contemptuous hatred Otto turned on him. The

eyes of imperial jade lingered coldly and then, snuggling against Sue

Brunswick's full bosom, Otto buried his face lovingly in her neck.

"I see you're admiring my cat. Gorgeous, isn't he? He just walked in on

Monday and we've adopted him. We're calling him Chockie on account of

his color. I don't know where he came from, but he's so affectionate and

sweet, I just adore him."

It sounded very unlike the Otto he knew. A faint throbbing in his ankle

reminded Mix of their last encounter. "Well, cheers," he said and passed

on. Back at home, he went into the bedroom where she lay under the

floorboards. None of the books, none of the court proceedings, told him

whether Christie had sometimes checked the hidden places to which he

had consigned his dead wife and those others. Did he sniff the air as Mix

was doing now? Did he stand at a rear window and contemplate the

garden of 10 Rillington Place, assuring himself that the graves of Ruth

Fuerst and Muriel Eady were undisturbed?

He could smell nothing beyond the usual odor of this house outside the

confines of his own flat, a smell of dust and dead insects and aged never-cleaned fibers. The scent of an old person, but not a dead one. His next

natural move was to the window that overlooked the garden. In spite of

the lack of rain, weeds were growing, green and vigorous, over the slight

hump of Danila's grave. To everyone but him it would soon be

undetectable.

Why not go away for a bit? Use up the time between now and the day

he'd fix on for seeing Nerissa again. He couldn't remember when he'd last

had a holiday. Of course, going to Colchester to stay with one's sister

wasn't what most people would call a holiday, but this trip would have

another purpose. He'd find out from Shannon where Javy was now. Not

still with the woman who had succeeded their mother, he was sure. Javy

would have moved on, to a new life, a new girlfriend, a new benefit office.

It was funny, what you'd call ironical, that the member of his family he

got on with best, the only one really he got on with at all, was the sister

Javy said he'd tried to kill. And it wasn't as if she didn't know about it.

Javy had taken care to tell her. Mix could hear his words now.

"You wouldn't let him handle your dolls if you knew what he'd done.

Tried to kill you, he did. Would have bashed your brains out if I hadn't

got there in time."

They went to the police station in Ladbroke Grove together on Friday

morning. Hazel said they didn't need her, she had to get home, but they

were to tell her what the police said and everything that happened. A

Middle Eastern man was coming out with a pretty young blond woman

as they went in.

"I wonder what they were in there for," said Queenie. "Perhaps he's an asylum seeker and she's going to marry him to make him a British citizen."

"It doesn't work like that anymore." Olive stared after the couple. "It's a much more complicated business."

They were given a Missing Persons form, which Olive filled in as best she could. "Is that it?" she said to the young detective constable.

"What do you want 'it' to be?"

"You could look for her, for a start."

He went away, was away for ten minutes, then came back with another

officer, the one who had just seen Abbas and Kayleigh. The other officer

said, "Is there a youngish guy called Michael Cellini, formerly of the

Fiterama Gym Equipment Company, living on the premises?"

"I don't know about any gym equipment," said Olive in a voice full of

scorn, "but his name's Cellini all right. Why?" If she had been less

innocent or had watched more television she would have known better

than to ask that question. Naturally, it remained unanswered.

"If we call at the address will there be anyone to let us in?"

"Cellini, I suppose," said Queenie, who had dropped the "Mr." after Mix's

remark about the Women's Institute. "No, you can't rely on him. One of

us will take care to be there."

"We would anyway." Olive spoke grimly. "Leave the place empty and he's

capable of setting fire to it."

They returned to St. Blaise House in a taxi after Queenie had bought

two slices of lemon cheesecake and two creamhorns at a patisserie in

Holland Park Avenue.

"I wonder if he's up there," Queenie said at the foot of the stairs.

Mix was. He'd spent most of the day phoning those of his old clients he

hadn't already targeted, but at the final count only six had agreed to

transfer their business to him and one of those was hesitant. In the early

evening he phoned his sister to ask if he could come and stay for a few

days. Shannon, who couldn't understand why anyone who didn't have to

would want to spend even a single day in a house on a council estate

outside Colchester with an exhausted woman, her boyfriend, her three

children and his two, asked him why.

"Do I have to have a reason? I reckoned it'd be nice to see you and

Markie and the kids, that's all."

"It's not that I mind, Mix, only you'll have to bunk in with the boys.

There's only three bedrooms."

"I haven't seen you for I don't know how long, Shan. Must be all of five

years."

"More like seven," said Shannon. "Lee was just a baby. Look, I've got to

go. When was you thinking of coming?"

Tomorrow, Mix said, some time tomorrow morning. He'd have to come

on the train. "My car's in dock. Having a new sump fitted. I'll get a taxi

from the station." He'd get the bus, but there was no need to tell her that.

Downstairs, Queenie and Olive waited for the police to come. Although

they had asked if anyone would be in later no police had appeared, it was

eight o'clock and beginning to get dark.

Queenie stood at the French windows, looking out into the twilit

garden. She had watched Mr. Singh calling to his geese to shut them up

for the night and now he had gone in and there was no one to be seen.

The colored lights on the palm tree came on, went off, and came on

again, twinkling brightly.

"He really is a very handsome man, you know, dear. Quite

distinguished-looking. He has the backbone of a high-ranking army

officer."

"Don't be absurd, Queenie." These days, listening to herself speak, Olive

was conscious that the mantle of Gwendolen's mannerisms and speech

patterns was descending onto her shoulders. She must watch herself. "It

has occurred to me that perhaps one of us should stay the night."

"Well, don't look at me. I should be frightened out of my wits staying in this place. Have you noticed how dark it is? And it's not possible to make it any lighter. The wattage of the bulbs is too low. We should have bought some hundred-watt bulbs."

"Why don't you just pop home and fetch some. I'll stay here till you get back. I shan't mind," said Olive, who would mind very much but was putting a brave face on it. "I shall phone my niece and see if she can persuade her husband to come and stay. He's a lovely man but he's very big and he looks quite alarming."

Queenie went off to fetch the lightbulbs and Olive remained where she was in the drawing room. They had cooked themselves scrambled eggs on toast for their supper and had tinned peaches afterward. The peaches came out of Gwendolen's cupboard and had a recent sell-by date on the can, so Queenie thought they couldn't do them much harm. After awhile

Olive phoned the Akwaas, and Tom said he'd come over about ninethirty. Staying in that crazy place would be a lark, he said.

Sleeping arrangements would have to be made for herself' and Tom.

Olive hated the thought, but it was no good postponing it. She toiled

upstairs to the first floor. Gwendolen's bedroom and dressing room and

the bathroom occupied most of it but two other rooms had bedsteads

and mattresses. They seemed rather less damp than the rest of the

house and the curtains at the windows neither resisted drawing nor

hung in rags. In a cupboard in one of these rooms she found sheets and

pillowcases and blankets. The blankets were far from clean and the

sheets, though washed, had never been ironed, but they would do. For

one night they would do. Making up the bed in the room nearer to the

head of the stairs, Olive asked herself if she were mad, electing to stay

overnight in this house. And then she heard Mix Cellini's footsteps

overhead and she understood that she was right. In the morning she

would phone the police and ask them if they meant to come.

Mix heard her too and wondered what was going on. Probably nothing.

It was very likely no more than those two old vultures deciding to help

themselves to whatever they could find before old Chawcer came back.

That would be typical. She had probably possessed some valuable

jewelry, those old girls always did. He congratulated himself. Most guys

in his position would have been into her things once they'd found her

dead and he felt quite smug because he hadn't touched a single one.

He heard the front door open and close, Ma Winthrop's voice calling out

some rubbish about lightbulbs, and because all these comings and goings

were making him nervous he came out on to the landing. Ma Fordyce was

going downstairs. As she reached the bottom the front doorbell rang.

This happened so seldom that it made Mix jump. Of course the light had

gone out and tonight it was particularly dark, no moon, not so many

lights showing in houses as usual. It was partly the fault of all those tall

trees, concealing street lights behind great dark branches. Someone had

opened the front door. He heard a man's voice, rich and fruity, and for

one moment he thought the impossible: that this was the police. Then Ma

Fordyce said, "Hallo, Tom. It is good of you to do this."

"No problem," said the fruity voice. "My pleasure. I brought a bottle of

wine. I thought it wouldn't go down badly and when we've wetted our

whistles I'll drive Mrs. Winthrop home. Can't let her go out alone on a

night like this."

There was silence. They must all have gone into the drawingroom. Mix

turned around slowly, took a step toward his front door and looking

down the left-hand passage, saw the ghost standing at the end in the

deep shadows. He clapped his hand over his mouth to stop himself

crying out. The ghost stood still and seemed to be staring at him. Then it

moved forward, its hands held out in front of it as if pleading for

something, as if begging-or threatening? His front door had been left on

the latch; Mix flung it wide open and fell inside the flat, tumbling over

the doormat then leaning back, holding the door shut against the ghost.

But he could feel no pressure against him and at last, still trembling, he

got up and bolted the door top and bottom, something he had never done

before.

Tom Akwaa was the first up in the morning. He always was and didn't

vary his routine just because he had taken the day off. "I'll stay till the

police come," he said to Olive when she came down for her tea. "You want

me to remind them you're waiting for them?"

"Would you?"

She couldn't resist starting to clean the kitchen while he was on the

phone. Olive belonged to a generation that changed the sheets when the

doctor was coming and put on their best underwear before they went on

a journey in case they were in an accident and had to go to hospital. Now

she tidied and scrubbed the kitchen and wiped all the surfaces in case

the policemen went in there for a cup of tea.

* * *

It was a relief to Mix to be going away. he might never come back. Not to

stay, at any rate. Just to collect his things and get his furniture stored

while he found another place. The appearance the previous night of the

ghost had been the last straw. Compared to that, all these people coming

and going didn't amount to much, but it was a nuisance, and worrying

too. Who had that man been and what was he doing here?

His backache had returned. Not severely, nothing like on that terrible

night after his grave-digging, but bad enough. He took two ibuprofen and

started to pack. He probably wouldn't stay with Shannon for more than

one night. The idea of sharing a room with her two unruly boys, one of

them fourteen she'd had both by the time she was nineteen--didn't

appeal. He put in a spare pair of jeans and three shirts. His leather jacket

he'd wear. Now to get out of the house before meeting either of those two

old witches.

The police needed no reminder once the information given them first by

Abbas Reza and then by Olive and Queenie had been compared. A

detective sergeant was out in the garden with Tom Akwaa when Olive

saw Mix Cellini coming down the stairs. She waited for him in the

hallway, though she had no intention of telling him of the policeman's arrival.

"Where are you going?" she said in her best highhandedtone.

He had his backpack over one shoulder. "No business of yours but

since you ask, I'm off to see my sister in Essex."

"I haven't seen your car about lately."

"No, you haven't, Nosy Parker, because it hasn't been here.I've sold it."

He opened the front door and slammed it hard behind him.Olive

abandoned her cleaning and began searching through the cluttered

drawers in the drawing room furniture to see if Gwendolen had a key to

his flat. It took her a long while but bythe time Queenie arrived she had

found eighteen keys of variousshapes and sizes.

"It's not any of those," Queenie said. "She told me once, she kept--1

mean 'keeps'--important keys in the tumble-drier."

Olive was distracted from her task by this fascinating sidelighton

Gwendolen's peculiarities. "What happened when she used it? The drier,

I mean."

"She never did use it, dear. Not for the purpose it was designed for,

anyway."

They went into the kitchen. The natural place for a tumbledrierwould

have been the washhouse, but Gwendolen had kept hers between the

oven and the fridge. From the window they could see the policean, who

had been joined by a secondone, poking a long thin stick into a weedgrown mound in what had long ago been a herbaceous border. Queenie

opened the port-hole on the tumble-drier and brought out a nettingbag,

which had probably once held onions or potatoes but now contained a

dozen keys.

"It'll be that one," Olive said, picking out the newest key, a shiny brass

Yale.

The two policemen with Tom Akwaa came in through the washhouse.

"There'll be some chaps coming to dig up the garden," saidthe detective

sergeant.

"Dig up the garden!"

The detective sergeant looked as if he might explain whyand then

thought better of it. He and the other man began climbing the stairs,

Tom following, and behind him Olive and Queenie taking the flights

slowly. At the top Queenie could hardly speak, but Olive rallied when one

of the policemen started ringing Mix's doorbell.

"He's just gone out." She decided to lie and hoped Queenie would have

the sense not to blurt out a denial. "Here's his key. He left it with me in

case you wanted to look round."

"Really?" The detective sergeant was only twenty-eight and he hadn't

known many murderers, but he would hardly have expected a killer to

invite the police in to search his premises in his absence. Still, never look

a gift horse in the mouth was his philosophy, so he took the key,

unlocked Mix's front door and they went in. That is, the police did.

Because it had been made plain they wouldn't be wanted, Tom with Olive

and Queenie went into the bedroom next door. It was unsufferably stuffy

and dusty. Tom, who had an unusually acute nose, sniffed and looked

suspicious, sniffed again.

"What's that nasty smell?"

"I can't smell anything, Tom."

"Nor can I."

A kindly soul, Tom Akwaa wouldn't have dreamt of telling them that

their faculties might have declined with age, so all he said was, "Well, I

can."

The policemen joined them, the younger one with an armful of books on

John Reginald Halliday Christie. Olive, a reader, looked curiously at their

spines, several of them adorned with a photograph of Christie's gaunt face.

"Can you smell anything funny in here?" Tom asked.

The bearer of Mix's library, a very tall young man, laid the books on the

dressing table and bent almost double so that his nose was nearly

touching the floor. "God, yes," he said as he straightened up.

When they had all gone but Queenie, who was making coffee in the

kitchen, Olive set about taking the sheets and pillowcases off the beds

she and Tom had used the night before. She was glad of something to do,

for she felt very unsettled and shaky. After all, as people constantly told

her, she was not so young as she had once been. The sight of that young

man poking a stick into that grave-shaped mound had begun it. Then

the smell, though she couldn't smell it. Strangely, those Christie books

had been the last straw, the books, that man's face on their covers, and

the implication of them. She was afraid of bursting into tears, but she

had managed to control herself. Her hands, trying to pull the top and

bottom sheets off Tom's bed, shook like thin papery leaves in the wind.

Gwendolen was dead, she had no doubt of it now. Although she hadn't

much liked the woman she called her friend, she felt the enormity of it,

the threatening awfulness of violent death. A tear started in each eye and

rolled down her cheeks. She wiped them on one of the sheets and

bundled it into a pillowcase to take home and wash.

Outside the door she heard a footstep above her. Had Cellini come

back? She set the pillowcase laundry bag down and listened, hoping that

her hearing wasn't going the way of her sense of smell. Another footfall.

Olive's instinct was to flee, to get down those stairs to Queenie as fast as

she could. But she stood her ground. Cellini couldn't have come back,

not come into the house and got up the stairs and into his flat without

one of them seeing and hearing him. The police had only been gone ten

minutes and Tom less than that. Olive set her foot on the bottom step of

the tiled flight and began to climb. It was the bravest thing she had ever done.

She would have crawled up the last five stairs if she hadn't been afraid

Queenie would come up with the coffee and see her. As it was, she

stopped at the top, hung on to the newel post and looked for the source of

the sounds. To the right, then to the left. Olive screamed. What is it? What's happened?"

She ignored Queenie's voice but she didn't scream again. The sound

refused to come. Trembling, she stared at the man with Christie's face. It

was quite a lot like the photograph on the spines of those books. He was

coming toward her, holding out both hands. She would die, she would

have a heart attack and die.

"Please, do not fear."

He spoke with a strong foreign accent. Not a bit like Christie would

have, thought Olive. She closed her eyes, opened them again and said in

a whisper, "Who are you?" She cleared her throat and her voice came out

more loudly and clearly. "Who are you?"

"I am called Omar. Omar Ahmed. I am from Iraq."

"The war's over," said Olive. "Were you in the war?"

He shook his head. She noticed now that his eyes were of a velvety

blackness never seen in Anglo-Saxons and his hair black, though

peppered with gray. Don't they all have mustaches? she asked herself,

and coincidentally he said, "I shaved my beard so not to look like Middle

Eastern man."

"Are you an asylum seeker?"

He nodded, then shook his head. "I like to be when I come, but I do it

wrong, I do no register, so now I am illegal immigrant. I want to go home

now, now I can and will be safe, I go back to Basra."

I don't know about "safe," she thought. "Have you been living here?"

She didn't wait for an answer but said, "Come down and have some

coffee with my friend and me."

She ignored Queenie's voice but she didn't scream again. The sound

refused to come. Trembling, she stared at the man Queenie was shocked

when she was first told, and feared he might be dangerous. But she

listened to his story. He had come into England clinging on to one of the
carriages of the Eurostar, jumping off it at Folkestone. From the first he
was certain that everything he was doing was illegal. That was why he
had failed to register as an asylum seeker until the time for so doing was
up and it was too late. He hitched a lift to London on a lorry from Prague
driven by a Czech. These two were almost unable to communicate, the
Czech man having no English and of course no Arabic and Omar having
no other languages but his own and a certain amount of English.
In London he slept on the street and begged by day. He watched
houses, seeking those that were empty or those with just one solitary
owner-occupier, preferably someone old or out a lot. He found St. Blaise
House and Gwendolen and when the weather grew so cold that he
thought he must die if he spent another night on the street, he looked for
a way in.
Here Queenie asked why he had come, why he hadn't stayed at home.
"When he said the name Saddam Hussein and spoke of his wife and
children who had disappeared, she nodded, put out her hand to touch
his, and asked no more.
"I climb across the roofs," he said. "It was easy. I get through a window

and that too is easy."

"When was this?"

"Oh, a long time. February, March, maybe. It was cold."

He had begged by day for money to buy food. Once, in Notting Hill Gate,

he saw "the man who live here" and thought it was all up with him but

the man had seemed more frightened than he was. He was always afraid

of him on the occasions they inevitably met, Omar didn't know why. He

would have told him everything and asked for help, only the man was so

frightened of him. The only living creature he had ever had much contact

with since coming to London from Folkestone was a cat who lived in the

house and who took a fancy to him and slept on his bed, probably

because of the fish and meat leftovers he gave it. In the cellar he found

an old record player and some records. These he had played softly

because without music he felt he couldn't exist.

One night, not long ago, he had heard a bumping sound and when he

came out had seen the man dragging something wrapped in a sheet up

the stairs. If it had been in Basra he would have thought it a dead body

but not here, not in England.

Queenie gave a little scream but Olive said, "You must tell the police

what you heard and saw. You must tell them when we all go to them and

you ask them how you can go home to Iraq." "When Omar looked nervous, she said, "They'll be glad to get you home. Once it's safe they'll help you to get home. I promise." I hope you like it when you get there, she said under her breath.

Chapter 29

The train for Norwich, calling at Witham, Colchester, and Ipswich ,was

scheduled to depart from platform thirteen. For amoment he thought of

giving up the whole trip or leaving thestation and trying to go by coach

instead. No, he'd bought his ticket and a terrible price it was. The last

time he had traveled by rail he had sat in first class, but things were

different now. He had to be careful. It was coming up to lunchtime. He

walked down to the buffet car, bought a burger and chips and acan of

Coke. Then-thinking, what the hell?-had a miniature of gin to put in his drink.

It was going to be grim at Shannon's. I hate children, he thought, and

felt nauseous at the idea of sharing a bedroom with those kids of hers.

The younger one, he remembered, had a perpetual cold and was always

sniffing. They never washed, either of them, and Shannon was too

overworked and too tired to check up on them. Suddenly it came back to

him, the day he had tried to kill her. But had he? Had he really? Was

that what he really meant, to beat her to death with that bottle? He

hadn't actually touched her, Javy had got there first.

When he came to think of it, all his troubles had started with Javy's

flogging him for that. Then his hitting his mother so that he had to leave

and fend for himself. That was two things. After that, what? Working for

Fiterama in Birmingham had been okay, but he should never have

accepted promotion and moved south. He hadn't much cared much

about Crippen, but still it was a disappointment to find his house gone,

though nothing to the shock of Rillington Place. Moving to Notting Hill

was a mistake and doing up that flat another. Self-pity washed over him

until he felt a stinging behind his eyes.

His whole life had been dogged by ill-luck. He'd gone to Shoshana's Spa

and his fate had made him meet Danila, and she'd incriminated him by

forcing him to kill her. The Indian had told Chawcer about seeing him

digging the garden, his back was so injured it would never be the same

again, and he'd killed a woman who was already dead. Now he was in a

train that left from platform thirteen.

He'd been counting as he reflected on his misfortunes .Thirteen. There

were thirteen of them. Not meaning to, he let out a low groan and a young

woman sitting opposite him stared.

"Are you all right?"

He nodded, tried and failed to force a smile. Thirteen steps down to

where he was now, jobless, his money dwindling, haunted probably for

the rest of his life, deserted by his friends. Thirteen steps, like the flight

down from his flat to her dark domain. And what lay in store? Shivering,

he poured the gin into his half-empty can of Coke. The girl who had

asked if he was all right was darting anxious looks at him and whispering

to the boy with her.

He should have been used to it, but the gin and Coke mixture knocked

him out. He felt exhausted. Though the carriage was full of people, mostly

very young people and all of them eating and drinking the sort of food

he'd had, dropping greasy wrappings and cans on the floor, he dropped

off to sleep. He couldn't keep awake.

In the dream he had he was at the top of those stairs, looking down. A

voice in his head was telling him not to go down but to step back. Stay

where you are, even the first step will be fatal. But something seemed to

be pulling him, drawing him forward and downward, one, two, three ... He

took a step, then another, and now at the bottom he could see Reggie

waiting for him. He woke up with a cry. The girl opposite him

wasn't sympathetic anymore. She was whispering to her boyfriend, and

Mix knew she was saying he was drunk. Perhaps he was. The air of

outside would clear his head and maybe it was just as well there would be

no drink at Shannon's. A voice, over the public address system said, "The

train will shortly be arriving in Colchester. Colchester next stop."

Mix took his bag down from the rack and moved toward the door. It was

already crowded with young people loaded with backpacks and bags and

surrounded by more. The train came slowly into the station and the

alighting passengers jostled each other out and onto the platform. Mix

stepped down but he didn't get very far.

No one put a hand on his shoulder. That was only in the movies. That

was for TV: The words the older policeman spoke to him he'd heard a

hundred times on TV; he knew them by heart. All of the stuff about

saying what you had to say now or you might harm your defense if you

wanted to rely on it in court. Well, he'd want to rely on it because it was

true.

"The girl was in self-defense," he said. "And the old woman was dead

before I touched her. I'm not a murderer, I'm not Christie."

Olive had lost her reading glasses. The only pair she had dated from

fifteen years before and they no longer did the job. She was on the point

of ringing her optician for a new pair when she remembered she had very

likely left them behind in St. Blaise House.

For a week it had been forbidden ground, accessible only to the police,

to pathologists and forensic experts. They had all gone now, Michael

Cellini had been arraigned with the murders of Gwendolen and Danila

Kovic in the magistrates' court, and things had quieted down. Olive let

herself into the house, resolving that before she left, glasses or no

glasses, she would leave the key behind. Perhaps put it where important

keys were kept, in the tumble-drier. Restoring it to this ridiculous place,

honoring as it were its former owner's bizarre wishes, seemed to her to be

a tiny tribute to Gwendolen.

Olive went into the drawing room, wondering what would happen to this

house. Was there anyone to inherit it? Gwendolen had never spoken of

relatives except some old cousin of her mother's who had been at her

funeral. But Mrs. Chawcer's funeral was fifty years ago this year.

Gwendolen had been the only child of, as far as Olive knew, only

children. Had she even made a will? St. Blaise House would be worth

millions to a property developer.

She tried to remember where she had been during the hours she had

spent here. In the drawing room, of course, in the kitchen--she wouldn't

have needed reading glasses there up in the bedroom she had slept in.

She climbed the stairs. Queenie had wept over Gwendolen, but she

hadn't, she had been angry, but glad too that Cellini hadn't been

anywhere near her when the truth came out. I'd have attacked him, she

said to the empty house, dragged my nails down his face. Keeping them

long and pointed would have been well worth it just for that. She went

into the sad, dirty, neglected bedroom. Searching it took about three

minutes and then she had to wash her hands.

The glasses came to light in the drawing room. They were under one of

the armchairs in a little enclave of dust and fluff and dead flies. She went

into the kitchen and was about to wash them under the tap, when the

doorbell rang. Some vendor of fish or sharpener of knives, she thought as

she went to answer

An elderly man and a middle-aged woman stood there. Two of

Gwendolen's forgotten relatives?

"My name is Reeves," the man said, all smiles. "Dr. Stephen Reeves. I

happened to be in the neighborhood and thought of dropping in on Miss

Chawcer. This is my wife, Diana, by the way. Is Miss Chawcer about?"

"I'm afraid not." Olive realized she would have to say why not, though in

expurgated form. "Gwendolen has passed away. It was very sudden."

Dr. Reeves shook his head, attempting to look sad. "Dear, oh dear. Well,

she was getting on. It comes to us all. We just thought we'd look in. As a

matter of fact"--he allowed his smile to break through-- "we're down here

on our honeymoon."

The End